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FAMOUS CURSES

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BY
ELLIOTT O'DONNELL

AUTHOR OF
"STRANGE DISAPPEARANCES," "THE CONFESSIONS
OF A GHOST HUNTER," ETC. ETC.



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FAMOUS CURSES

CHAPTER I

THE CURSE OF THE ERSKINES OF MAR

MANY centuries ago, at a time when Pictish Sovereigns ruled Scotland, the most powerful hereditary chieftains under these sovereigns were known as Maormors.

According to Sir Bernard Burke, the only present-day family that can claim an uninterrupted succession, though in a female line he admits, from these Maormors are the Erskines of Mar, and they, therefore, can claim to be the oldest titled family in Great Britain. Actually, the title of Maormor fell into disuse more than a thousand years ago, when the title of Earl was substituted for it, the Earls for many centuries possessing almost, if not quite, the same power in Scotland as the Maormors. However, the chief interest attaching to the Erskines of Mar does not lie so much in their antiquity as in the fact that they are associated with a curse that was most literally worked out.¹

Before details are gone into regarding the curse, mention must be made of one or two incidents in the previous history of the family, and of one incident in particular, which is almost as remarkable in its way as the curse.

¹ Vide *Family Romances*, by Sir J. B. Burke, Vol. II.

This notable incident is as follows :

At the end of the ninth century the Danes, under Sigurd, first Scandinavian Earl of Orkney, invaded the North of Scotland and were strenuously opposed by a Pictish force under Melbrigda, Maormor of the Mars. Now Melbrigda, who possessed immense physical strength, also possessed a very big tooth that projected from one of his jaws, history does not say which, like a boar's tusk. This peculiar disfigurement gave rise to considerable mirth among his Danish enemies, who alluded to him jeeringly as "Big tooth," "Hog's tusk," and a variety of other very uncomplimentary names. And none laughed at him louder than Sigurd. Then, one day, when a great battle between the Danes and the Picts was at its height, Sigurd met Melbrigda in single combat, slew him, and cutting off his head, slung it mockingly by its long hair across his saddle bow.

However, as he was galloping across the battlefield, with the head suspended thus, the jolting of the horse caused it to bump up and down, and Melbrigda's projecting tooth, coming in violent contact with Sigurd's bare leg, picked a hole in it. The wound festered, as well it might, for Melbrigda's monster tooth could have been none too sanitary ; and as the science of antiseptics no less than the science of dentistry was at that time unknown, no attempt was made to disinfect Sigurd's wound, so that mortification set in and he died.

The victor being thus killed by his vanquished foe's much ridiculed tooth, it will be seen that Melbrigda, or rather his ghost, may have laughed loudest and longest after all.

Another of the incidents to which I have referred is directly associated with the crest of the Erskines,

a hand holding a kind of scimitar, with their motto, "I think the more."¹

In one of the earliest of the Picts' many battles against the Danes a young Pictish noble displayed great valour, one of the acts denoting his great strength and skill being the cutting off of the head of a Danish chieftain called Enrique, or Hendrik. Presenting himself to the Scottish king, the decapitated head in one hand and his scimitar in the other, he proudly displayed the trophy to his monarch, saying that he hoped to show him some more Danish heads before the combat was over.

Pleased with the youth's appearance and wonderful confidence in himself, the King asked him his name, and on being told by the youth that he had no family name, he at once said :

"Then I will just give you one. Seeing that you approached me on the dagger (i.e. dagger in hand), you shall be known henceforth as the Maormor "Eriskene" (corrupted in course of time to Erskine).

According to this legend, for the incident is of a more or less legendary nature, the King gave the youth at the same time the words: "I think the more," for his motto, though the connection of these words with the name "Eriskene" and the head of the Dane is somewhat obscure. Possibly there is only a certain amount of truth in the incident; but, at all events, there is sufficient to make it serve as a further proof of the extraordinary military genius possessed by those early members of the House of Mar.

Thomas, the 13th Earl of Mar, was the last of his family in direct male descent from the ancient Maormors.² On his death, his sister, the Countess

¹ Vide *Family Romance*.

² *Ibid*

Margaret, succeeded to his estates. She married William, Earl of Douglas, by whom she had a son, James, who became Earl of Douglas and 14th Earl of Mar; but as he was killed at the Battle of Otterburn in 1388, and left no issue, the estates again passed to a woman, i.e. his sister, Isabella.

She, Isabella, married Alexander Stewart, a natural son of the Royal House, and the King granted to him the Earldom of Mar. There being no children of this union the Earldom was claimed, in 1435, by Robert, Lord Erskine, the only son of Janet Keith, Lady Erskine, whose mother was the daughter of Sir John Monteith by Lady Ellen Mar, daughter of the Earl of Mar and niece of Robert Bruce.

This descent, according to Sir J. B. Burke, made Robert, Lord Erskine, the undoubted heir of the Mar family, and, *de jure*, 15th Earl of Mar; but James III would not acknowledge the claim and gave the Earldom of Mar to his own brother, and after his brother's death, to his favourite, Cochrane, who was hanged at Sander's Bridge in 1482.

The Earldom then passed to Alexander, son of James III, and after him to James Stewart, Earl of Moray, but it was eventually restored to its rightful owner, John, Lord Erskine, in whose time the famous curse was pronounced.

As to the originator of the curse, opinions differ. While some writers attribute it to Thomas the Rhymer, some assert that it was uttered by an Abbot of Cambuskenneth Abbey; and others by some bard of the House of Mar, whose name has sunk into obscurity.

On examining the claims of these three persons in turn, there certainly seems to be much to recommend that of Thomas the Rhymer.

To begin with, he was a curser on a grand scale. Indeed, if he were responsible for all or even a portion of the curses attributed to him, then he was unquestionably one of the most prolific cursers there have ever been, and the unfortunate Erskine of Mar might well have been included in the almost inexhaustible category of those upon whom he vented his displeasure in the form of a curse.

There is nothing, apparently, to prevent this being so, as far as the period is concerned, for although the actual date of Thomas the Rhymer's death is somewhat dubious, there would appear to be little doubt that he was alive at the time popularly ascribed to the pronouncement of the curse. All the same, for my own part, I do not think Thomas the Rhymer was the culprit in this case. In my opinion it is much more likely that the real author of the curse was the Abbot of Cambuskenneth, and for this reason : In 1565 the Earldom of Mar was, as I have said, restored to the rightful owner, John, Lord Erskine, whose family had been deprived of it for more than a century ; and he took his seat in the Scottish Parliament of 1565 as the twentieth Earl of Mar. Between this date and 1571, he seized the Abbey of Cambuskenneth, expelled the Abbot and monks, pulled down the buildings, and utilized the material for the building of a new palace for himself in Stirling.

This palace, which never advanced beyond the façade, is still known as "Mar's Work." Now what is more likely than that the Abbot, burning with resentment at being so ruthlessly deprived of his Abbey, an act which he doubtless considered a gross act of sacrilege, bearded proud Mar in his stolen property, and cursed him. One can easily picture the scene. The venerable prelate, his face filled with

well justified wrath, raising a hand to heaven and appealing to the great God of Justice to punish the sacrilegious nobleman. A sense of real grievance often makes men giants, and the Abbot of Cambuskenneth had such excellent grounds for feeling injured and good cause for his righteous indignation, that even the Earl of Mar, proud and influential though he was, none more so in Scotland, must have felt somewhat uneasy. Yes, we can well imagine that scene ; and I repeat, that, in my opinion, of the three claims we are considering that of the Abbot of Cambuskenneth carries the most weight.

It is conceivable, of course, that the curse was pronounced by some bard of the Erskines, who, failing to impress the Head of the House with his verses, nourished a bitter resentment against him ; for true it is that "None is more bitter than the poet scorned" ; but no matter who the author of the curse, its existence is established ;¹ and it may be dated approximately, since it was, no doubt, pronounced shortly before the 20th Earl of Mar was created Regent of Scotland.

According to Sir Bernard Burke, the curse was uttered in Gaelic verse, "but it is doubtful," he adds, "if it was ever written down ; and the family have always been averse from giving any details concerning it."

Translated, the curse reads thus :

"Proud Chief of Mar : Thou shalt be raised still higher, until thou sittest in the place of the King. Thou shalt rule and destroy, and thy work shall be after thy name ; but thy work shall be the emblem of the House, and shall teach mankind, that he who cruelly and haughtily raised himself upon the ruins

¹ Vide *Family Romance*, by Sir J. B. Burke, Vol. II, p. 184.

of the holy cannot prosper. Thy work shall be cursed and shall never be finished. But thou shalt have riches and greatness, and shalt be true to thy Sovereign, and shalt raise his banner in the field of blood. Then, when thou seemest to be highest—when thy power is mightiest, then shall come thy fall ; low shall be thy head amongst the nobles of the people. Deep shall be thy moan among the children of dool (sorrow). Thy lands shall be given to the stranger ; and thy titles shall be among the dead. The branch that springs from thee shall see his dwelling burnt, in which a king is nursed—his wife a sacrifice in that same flame ; his children numerous but of little honour ; and three born and grown, who shall never see the light. Yet shall thine ancient town stand ; for the brave and the true cannot be wholly forsaken. Thou proud head and daggered hand must dree thy weird, until horses shall be stabled in thy hall, and a weaver shall throw his shuttle in thy chamber of state. Thine ancient Tower—a woman's dower—shall be a ruin and a beacon, until an ash sapling shall spring from its topmost stone. Then shall thy sorrows be ended, and the sunshine of royalty shall beam on thee once more. Thine honours shall be restored ; the kiss of peace shall be given to thy Countess, though she seek it not, and the days of peace shall return to thee and thine. The line of Mar shall be broken ; but not until its honours are doubled and its doom is ended.”

One of the most remarkable features in this very remarkable curse is the rapidity with which it started working out.¹

In 1571 the Earl of Mar was made Regent of Scotland and guardian of James I, whose cradle is

¹ Vide *Family Romance*.

still in the possession of the Mar family, thus fulfilling the opening sentence, "Thou shalt be raised still higher, until thou sittest in the place of the King." As ruler, the Earl displayed considerable severity, crushing any attempts at risings and removing from his path anyone who threatened to be dangerous, thus fulfilling the statement, "Thou shalt rule and destroy."

"Thy work shalt be cursed and never finished" undoubtedly refers to the palace, which the Earl started building, but which neither he nor anyone else ever finished. Designated, as I have already stated, "Mar's Work," it can still be seen at Stirling. "Thou shalt have riches and greatness, and shalt be true to thy Sovereign, and shalt raise his banner in the field of blood" was fulfilled thus: The Mars continued prosperous, ever adding to their wealth, till 1715, when the Earl of Mar, true to his Sovereign, the Chevalier James Stuart, son of James II, raised the banner of the Stuarts in Scotland. He was defeated at the battle of Sheriff Muir, and his title being then forfeited and most of his lands seized and sold by the English Government to the Earl of Fife, the following sentences of the curse were also fulfilled: "Then when thou seemest to be highest, when thy power is mightiest, then shall come thy fall; low shall be thy head amongst the nobles of the people. Deep shall be thy moan among the children of dool (sorrow). Thy lands shall be given to the stranger, and thy titles shall be among the dead."

Many years after Sheriff Muir, John Francis Erskine, grandson of the aforesaid Earl, took up his residence at Alloa Tower, at one time the abode of James VI when an infant, and still in the possession of the Erskines, and it was while he was there the

dreadful tragedy occurred that fulfills this portion of the curse: "The branch that springs from thee shall see his dwelling burnt, in which a king is nursed—his wife a sacrifice in that same flame."

The tragedy was this:

One night a fire broke out in the Tower in some strangely mysterious fashion, and Mrs. Erskine, wife of John Francis, was burnt so severely that she died.

Miss Erskine, afterwards Lady Frances, and sister of John Francis, owed her escape to the fact that feeling ill that night she had retired to her bedroom by way of a private staircase, instead of by the main staircase leading past the room that was once the nursery of James VI. Had she not done so, she would have been caught in the fire, which broke out in the room that was once a nursery, and most probably would have shared the fate of her sister-in-law. Mrs. Erskine left several children, including three who were born blind, and all lived to be old; thus fulfilling the words: "And three born and grown, who shall never see the light."

How the rest of the curse worked out may be seen by comparing the facts I am about to narrate with the words of the prophecy. After the fire the family left the Tower, which had been reduced to ruins and was no longer fit for human habitation. Bats and owls soon took up their abode there, and it became one of the most doleful looking spots imaginable. In the beginning of the last century, when an alarm of a French invasion was raised, a number of yeomanry came to the town of Alloa, and there not being enough accommodation there for them, they took possession of the ruined tower and stabled their horses in its once handsome hall. Stranger still, in or about the

year 1810, a party of visitors from some of the neighbouring mansions, going to the Tower one day to look at it, discovered to their astonishment a weaver calmly plying his loom in what had formerly been the state chamber. It transpired he had been evicted from his house in Alloa, owing to disability to pay his rent, and having nowhere else to go had taken up his abode at the Tower.

More remarkable yet, an ash sapling took root in the topmost stone of the ruins, and many people, who had heard of the curse, visited the Tower between the years 1815 and 1820 to see it.

In 1822, George IV restored the Earldom of Mar to the grandson of the Earl who had raised the Stuart standard in the Highlands. The restored Earl's grandson, John Francis, was in possession of two Earldoms, those of Mar and Kellie. His wife was never presented at St. James's Palace, but quite accidentally she met Queen Victoria in a small room in Stirling Castle, and the Queen, on learning who she was, immediately kissed her. And with that Royal salute, "the weird dreed out and the doom of the Mar ended."

John Francis Erskine, Earl of Mar and Kellie, having no children, was succeeded by his nephew, John Francis Erskine Goodeve-Erskine, child of his sister, Lady Jemima, wife of William James Goodeve, the line being thus broken in fulfilment of the addendum, if one may style it such, to the curse.

Like "Mar's Work," the ruins of Alloa Tower yet remain. They stand, surrounded by lofty trees in Glebe Park, near the town of Alloa, and at night, when the moonlight whitens the ivy clad walls and the ground around them is flecked with dark, silent

shadows, those visiting the spot cannot fail to be impressed with a feeling of eeriness. Indeed, viewed at such an hour, the ruins seem to be impregnated with mystery and tragedy—they look cursed.

CHAPTER II

"THE BLOODY FOOTSTEP" OF SMITHILLS HALL

ONE of the oldest and most picturesquely situated houses in Lancashire is Smithills Hall, the seat of the Ainsworth family, near Bolton. When it was first built is not known. According to some authorities, it was in existence as far back as the Saxon Heptarchy, and it may be inferred that this was actually the case, since an old gateway into the courtyard bears the date 680. The history of the Hall can easily be traced back to the fourteenth century, when the Lord of the Manor of Smithills was William Radcliffe; but he apparently is the first owner of the property about whom we know anything for certain.

In the reign of Henry VI the Hall passed into the possession of the Bartons, through the marriage of a member of that family to Joan, daughter and heiress of Sir Ralph Radcliffe; and half a century or so later, it was almost entirely rebuilt by Andrew Barton, since whose time it has remained much as we see it to-day.

It is strange, indeed, that so perfect a relic of bygone days should be found so close to that smoke-begrimed and ultra modern town of Bolton. The winding of the road, from which the house stands back some little distance, and dense clusters of trees hide it from the view of the passer-by. On entering its precincts by way of the seventh-century arch, one

finds oneself in an ancient courtyard facing a large lawn, on one side of which lies the Hall, a magnificent specimen of Early Tudor architecture. Its interior is well described in an account of the Hall published some years ago in a local journal. “The old Lancashire lath-and-plaster style of building,” says the writer of the article, “is everywhere apparent. Black beams placed obliquely on a ground of dazzling whiteness, with ornamentations of quatrefoil standing out in charming relief, present a pleasing picture of the taste of our ancestors in matters architectural.”

After expatiating on the ivy clad walls and gateway of this venerable mansion, this same writer remarks : “The old fashioned domestic chapel forms a wing to the east of the block, and around this, too, clusters the loving parasite, the healthy hue of green blending charmingly with the stained windows, rich in design, and commemorative of the heraldry of past and present owners of Smithills.” He then describes in detail the fine wainscotting and oak panelling of the great hall, staircases, and bedrooms, and finally refers to the imprint seen on the stone in the passage leading to the Chapel and known far and wide as the bloody footstep.

By the side of this apparently indelible footprint a plate is fixed, upon which is inscribed : “Footprint of the Reverend George Marsh, of Deane, martyr, who was examined at Smithills, and burned at Chester, in the reign of Queen Mary.”

The story connected with it that is generally said to be true is as follows :

George Marsh, a Protestant clergyman, after being warned several times by those in authority to cease propounding heresy in public, was finally arrested and taken to Smithills Hall, where he was accused

before the owner, Robert Barton, who was chief magistrate for that district, and a most devout Catholic. Bigot though he was, Barton would have let his prisoner go free provided he had promised not to preach again in public. This, however, Marsh refused to do, and Barton had no other alternative but to commit him for trial. It was then, after his commitment, when he was being led out of Barton's presence, with, perhaps, rather more roughness than necessary, that he stamped his foot furiously on a stone in the passage, outside the room he had just quitted, and, as a curse, besought God to let the imprints of his foot remain there for ever, in token of the righteousness of his cause, and the abominable cruelty of his enemies. He is alleged to have added : "And woe betide anyone who tries to efface or remove it."

Dragging him along with them, his captors then took him to the nearest prison, and, in due course, he was brought up for trial at Lathom before the Earl of Derby.

Being found guilty of heresy and of propounding heretical doctrines he was finally burned at the stake on April 24, 1555. This is the story, as I have said, that is most generally believed to be true,¹ concerning "The bloody footstep" of Smithills Hall. The "footstep" is styled bloody because it is declared that if on a certain night in the year, presumably the anniversary of the curse, you examine the footprint in the stone, you will find it moist with blood. Sceptics aver that the stone is merely damp with dew, or that the moisture on it arises from some other quite natural cause ; but they can offer no feasible explana-

¹ Vide *Haunted Houses and Family Legends*, by John Ingram, and *Lancashire Folklore*, by Harland & Wilkinson, pp. 135-6.



THE GHOST AT SMITHILLS HALL

tion as to why the moisture is always red. Attempts have, from time to time, been made to delete the footprint, but they invariably have failed, and those who have tried to delete or remove it have met with some dire disaster. One one occasion, when the stone containing it was taken from the hall and thrown into an adjacent wood, such dreadful noises occurred every night at the Hall, that the stone was eventually restored to its original position, whereupon the disturbances ceased. But the curse connected with “The bloody footprint” is apparently responsible for other ghostly phenomena at Smithills Hall; and these phenomena are not merely auditory, since on one occasion at least something was seen, a something that, in no small degree, helps to confirm the generally accepted story of George Marsh, the Martyr. What happened was this :

In the year 1732, a certain Mr. M——¹ arrived on a few days’ visit at the Hall, and as the house happened to be very full of guests at the time, he was put in a seldom used spare room known as the Green Chamber. It was a spacious apartment, rendered somewhat gloomy by a low ceiling, black oak floor, panelled walls, and massive antique furniture. In the centre of the apartment stood a very ghostly-looking four-poster, with peculiarly hearse-like plumes and heavy canopy. Mr. M——, who was rather a timid man, on retiring to his apartment for the night, at once proceeded to peep under the bed and to examine carefully the huge cupboard that served as a wardrobe. At last, apparently satisfied that no one was secreted in the room, he took up a book, and seating himself in front of the log fire, which he stirred into a

¹ Vide *Lancashire Folklore*, pp. 135-6, by Messrs. Harland & Wilkinson.

blaze, he settled himself down to read. The heat from the fire, however, combined with the monotonous sound of the ashes falling on the hearth, had such a somniferous effect, that he was soon compelled to leave off trying to read and get into bed ; and he fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. Presently he awoke with a start and a distinct feeling that something was about to happen. The fire was still burning brightly, and it filled the whole room with a blood-red light, that crimsoned the walls and so flickered on the ancestral portraits hanging on the walls, that it made them, seemingly, quiver and stir, and behave generally as if they were about to step out of their frames on to the floor.

Also, owing, it seemed, to the flickering light, strange shadows danced to and fro on the low ceiling ; while every breath of wind, blowing in through the cracks of the ill-fitting windows and under the door, made the tapestry on the walls stir and rustle in the most mysterious and ghostly fashion. However, saving for the crackling of the log wood, and occasional moaning and sighing of the wind down the chimney and round the outside of the house, there was no other sound, not even the friendly squeaking and scampering of mice. Mr. M——, now quite awake, was looking wonderingly at the grotesque shadows on the ceiling and walls, when a slight noise made him glance quickly at the cupboard, whence it seemed to proceed. The brass knob on the cupboard door, glittering in the firelight, at once attracted his attention. He gazed at it, and as he gazed he saw it slowly turn. In a moment all his faculties were very much on the alert and he was sitting up in bed, his heart beating furiously. Praying to heaven that he was mistaken, he watched the door intently, and to

his horror, his wild unmitigated horror, the handle turned again and kept on turning, till presently the door itself commenced to open. He was, naturally, far from brave, and he now felt absolutely sick with terror; cold beads of sweat stood upon his forehead, whilst his heart seemed to stop beating. Yet he was so fascinated that he could not, try hard as he would, remove his gaze from the cupboard door; and consequently, held spellbound, he was compelled to watch for the mysterious hidden something, that he felt might now reveal itself at any moment, to emerge. What would it be like? Was it a burglar, a hideous cut-throat looking ruffian, wearing a black crape mask and armed with bludgeon and knife, or was it some denizen of the Unknown, some unearthly form, frightful even beyond the wildest and most fantastic of imaginations. Slowly, very slowly, merely the fraction of an inch at a time, the door went on opening, until at last, in the cupboard, Mr. M—— could see something white. This something white was a face, and had it been a repulsive face, it is not inconceivable that Mr. M—— would either have gone mad or have died right away from sheer fright; but mercifully there was nothing evil or even alarming in the face, which, though ghastly pale, was not at all unpleasant to look at. It was, in fact, the face of an elderly man with grey hair and pointed beard, and though the expression was somewhat stern, it was at the same time that of a lofty minded good man. A few seconds later, and the door had opened wide enough for Mr. M—— to see that the face belonged to a man clad in the dress of a minister of bygone days; and that this man, in one of his hands, held a book that looked like a Bible. Pointing to the book with his free hand, the man now came out of the

cupboard, and crossing the room with a curious gliding motion, he made for the bedroom door, vanishing with startling abruptness when he was within a few feet of it. Mr. M—— then realized that what he had seen was a ghost, and the shock to his senses was such that he fainted. When he came to, the firelight had died down and the room was plunged in total darkness. Too scared to stir, he lay without moving and hardly even daring to breathe, till it was light. He then dressed and made his way to the dining-room, where he remained till the family came down to breakfast. He narrated his experience to them, at the same time begging that another bedroom might be allotted to him, as he felt that he could not pass another night in one that was so badly haunted. His request was, of course, granted, his host at the same time informing him that what he had seen was, without doubt, the ghost of George Marsh, the Martyr.

“It is the first time to my knowledge,” he added, “that anyone has ever seen him, but I am not surprised that he has appeared, as we have occasionally heard noises that could only be attributed to the Supernatural. From your description of his expression and from the fact that he was carrying what looked like a Bible, I infer he is displeased at my having discontinued the services in an old chapel attached to these premises. I will see that they are resumed forthwith, so that the poor martyr shall not be again disturbed on that account.”

The owner of Smithills Hall proving as good as his word, no further disturbances occurred, and the rest of Mr. M——’s visit passed uneventfully enough. Since then, so far as I can gather, nothing ghostly has been seen either in the Green Chamber or in any other

part of the Hall, though the footprint, as I have already stated, still remains intact.

It will be noted that Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of the origin of “ The Bloody Footstep ” is entirely different from the one I have just quoted, which is generally believed to be the true one. Nevertheless, when he was on a visit to England during the early part of last century, he stayed for a short time at Smithills Hall, and was so interested in the footprint, that he wrote what would appear to have been, in his opinion, the true account of its origin, in a work upon which he was then engaged, entitled, *Septimus*.

Briefly told, the origin of the footprint, according to Nathaniel Hawthorne, is this :

Many years ago the owner of Smithills Hall, Sir Forrester, spent all his time studying black magic and alchemy, and therein making experiments, whereby he hoped to alight on something that would enable him to prolong his life indefinitely. At last, just as he was beginning to despair of success, he got in touch, one day, with some strange, mysterious Power that promised him all he wanted, provided he sacrificed a pure young life every thirty years.

Feeling himself growing old, and being desperately afraid of death, Forrester consented to the bargain, and immediately commenced searching around for his first victim. Now, it so happened that living under the same roof with him was a young girl, an orphan, who had been committed to his care by his father, when on the verge of death. Pure and also beautiful, it seemed to Forrester that this young girl was in every way admirably suited to his purpose.

Consequently, he asked her to go for a walk with him, one evening, when he knew no one was about. She readily consented, and he took her into a wood

on his estate, a part of which wood even yet remains. It was an evening upon which Nature seemed at her best, and the young girl paused every now and again to enthuse over some lovely flower or gaily plumaged bird.

However, it was not long before they came to a singularly gloomy spot in the very heart of the wood, and the young girl, looking around her, half frightened, caught hold of her companion by the arm and exclaimed :

“ Oh, take me away from here, I do not like this place at all. It is so dark and lonely and horrible, that one might well imagine it the scene of some dreadful crime.”

“ It certainly isn't the spot one would select for a honeymoon,” Sir Forrester said gravely, “ and I have chosen it for a very different purpose.” He looked at her as he spoke, and their eyes met. There was little attempt at a struggle, she was taken so completely by surprise and so paralysed with fear. Indeed, in almost less time than it takes to tell the deed was done, and as she lay dead, all silent and still at his feet, Sir Forrester stood for some moments staring at her, hardly able to realize what had actually happened.

Then, fetching the spade he had previously hidden in a spot near by, he hurriedly began digging a grave, the brilliant moon shining full on him and the owls and ravens watching him intently from the surrounding tree-tops. Murderers, despite the care they take to cover their crime, not infrequently make blunders, and the owner of Smithills Hall made a bad one.

Without being aware that he was doing so, he trod with his right foot in his victim's blood, and when he reached home, all along the garden path, and inside the house, on the threshold of the door, across the

Hall, and along the paved passage leading to his bedroom, he left bloody footprints. On the morrow all the servants saw them ; and they pointed to them significantly when the young lady of the Hall was found to be missing.

Now, as rumour soon spreads, it was not long, of course, before everyone in the neighbourhood of the Hall, following the example set by his household, cast suspicious glances at Sir Forrester and studiously avoided him. At last, unable to bear this treatment any longer, he went abroad ; but no matter where he wandered, it was the same, always in his track appeared bloody footprints.

Hence, shunned by all and regarded with positive aversion, he at last grew so desperate that he returned to Smithills ; and when he saw the familiar faces of his old servants, who were lined up in the Hall, awaiting his arrival, he was almost crying with delight. However, instead of greeting him with joy, they were strangely silent, and he was about to make some pleasant remark to them, hoping thereby to re-establish himself in their good graces, when he stopped short in dismay. They were all staring at something on the ground behind him. Sick with apprehension, he looked to see what it was, and there, sure enough, were the bloody footprints. With a shriek of terror he rushed upstairs to his room, and the bloody footprints followed him.

Some days later, it was found that he had vanished. No one had seen him go and no one knew what had become of him.

Some thought that, like the Wandering Jew, he could not die, but would be compelled to go living for all time, whilst others believed he had gone to some very lonely spot and there committed suicide.

Be this as it may, however, according to Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of his footmarks remained imprinted on a stone in the Hall, where it is yet to be seen, and, as has already been stated, on certain nights in the year, it is found to be wet with blood, while once in every generation bloody imprints of a right foot only are traceable along the carriage drive and all around the house.

One wonders how much of this story was founded on fact. That it is not a mere fabrication from beginning to end strikes me as self-evident, and although the story may seem almost absurdly fanciful, as a whole, I believe that it may contain an element of truth based on something its author was told—or perhaps experienced—when he was staying at Smithills Hall. All the same, I am inclined to think that the more feasible explanation of the bloody footprint is that embodied in the story of the Rev. George Marsh, since various of the incidents in it are corroborated by history.

Sceptics, of course, shrug their shoulders when mention is made of the footprint, but for all that, they can offer no satisfactory explanation of its continued existence on natural grounds, and therefore the phenomenon remains still attributable to the Unknown.

CHAPTER III

THE LAMBTON WORM

A BOOK illustration that had a greater fascination for me as a child than any other showed a knight, clad in a suit of armour, studded all over with razor-like blades, and in the act of thrusting his sword down the throat of a creature with large ears, four legs, and a long scaly body, like the dragon on old coins. It was stated in a footnote to this illustration, entitled "The Lambton Worm," that it was the fascimile of a piece of sculpture in the garden house at Lambton Castle; and that it represented an episode in a famous tradition associated with the Lambton family. The illustration in any case very vividly portrayed a deadly combat between knight and monster, and as it figured too prominently in my dreams, and so proved disastrous to my nightly rest, it was taken from me; and it was not till years later, when I was grown up, that I came across a detailed account of this same tradition in a work on Durham by that celebrated antiquarian and historian, John Surtees.¹

From a study of the researches made by Surtees, it would seem that although the official pedigree of the Lambtons of Lambton Castle, Co. Durham, can only be traced back to the twelfth century, from

¹ Vide *History and Antiquities of Durham*, by John Surtees, Vol. 2, p. 171, etc. Surtees apparently founded his story on an old MS. at one time in possession of the Middletons of Offerton.

various records and allusions it is fairly clear they were at Lambton prior to that period. There is, certainly, no record of any other family being in possession of their estates there before them. The Old Hall, the home of the Lambtons, which may or may not have been standing then (most probably it was built on the site of an even older dwelling), was demolished in 1797, and a new house was erected on the ground it had occupied and allotted to Mr. Harry Morton, the land steward of the Lambton family, the Lord of Lambton himself occupying a magnificent castle which had recently been built nearby.

¹The first Lambton of whom I can find any mention in historical records, is John Lambton, who was witness to the Charter of Uchtred de Wodeshend between 1180 and 1200. The next to be considered worthy of note by any historian is Robert de Lambton, Lord of Lambton (son and heir of William, son of Robert), who "occurs" in an "inquisition" in 1350; and, seemingly, his son William, who married Alice Salcock and died in 1430, was the father of that Lambton around whom the famous tradition associated with the family centres. At any rate this William had three sons: William, who succeeded him as Lord of Lambton and died in 1431; Thomas, who became Lord of Lambton after William; and John, Knight of Rhodes, who inherited the title and property upon Thomas's death. It is the latter, apparently, who became the central figure in the above-named tradition, which I will now proceed to narrate, merely stating, by way of preface, that the Lambtons of those days, one and all, were renowned for courage and

¹ Vide an historical, topographical, and descriptive view of Co. Durham, by Messrs. Mackenzie & Ross.

recklessness on the battlefield, and also for a certain recklessness in everything they said and did—they cared, in short, neither for God, Man, nor Devil—and that none upheld the family reputation, in this respect, more conspicuously than the hero of this tradition, John Lambton, Knight of Rhodes.

Now, this same John Lambton was very fond of fishing. Consequently, he picked up his rod and reel one Sabbath morning, and, despite the remonstrances of the rest of the household, who were preparing for church, and thought it extremely wicked of any member of the family to be doing otherwise, strolled down to the banks of the River Wear, which flowed past the Old Hall grounds. Arriving there, he leisurely put his rod together, and laughing heartily at the shocked faces of the passers-by on their way to church, was soon engrossed in his favourite pastime. As minute after minute sped by, however, without any sign of a bite he began to get angry, and his language at last became so outrageous that those who happened to be within earshot crossed themselves in pious horror. He had just given vent to another oath, which for blasphemy outstripped all his previous efforts, when down went his float, and the next moment there was a pull at his line, so strong that the reel was almost wrenched from him.

“Something at last,” he shouted triumphantly, “and by —— a big one.”

He gave the fish line, and after playing with it for some time proceeded to pull it in. To his wonder and dismay, however, it proved to be no fish at all, but a most repulsive and terrible looking reptile. Taking it from the hook with considerable

caution he threw it into a well¹ close beside the river, saying to a man who had watched him catch it :

“What sort of a thing do you call that, stranger? I believe it’s the Devil.”

“It’s ugly enough,” the stranger replied, with a shiver. “I am surprised that you dared handle it; I wouldn’t have touched it for anything. I’ve seen all kinds of queer creatures in my travels abroad, but nothing half as hideous or venomous looking as that thing. It had the nine holes on each side of the mouth, which in the Orient are said to be the Devil’s brand, and only to be found in the most foul and evil things.”

“Well, whatever it is,” John Lambton laughed, “it can’t do much harm now. That well is several feet deep, and unless the thing is aided by the Devil it can’t possibly get out of it.”

“Wait and see,” the stranger remarked, and he forthwith walked away.

Now, despite young Lambton’s seeming carelessness, this incident made a deep impression on him, and not caring to cast in his line again, lest he should hook something even more evil looking, if such a thing could possibly be, he took his rod to pieces and wended his way home, and on arriving there he still brooded over his adventure. For many days afterwards, too, he kept on thinking of it, until from being the wild, devil-may-care youth he had been

¹ The Worm Well, the name by which it was widely known, is on the north bank of the Wear, in the estate of North Biddick, about one and a half miles from the Old Hall.

In olden days it was in repute as a Wishing Well, and pins might have been seen lying in the clear gravel at the bottom of it. In later years it was covered over. The distance from Fatfield Hill to the Well is almost twenty-six yards, and from the Well to the Wear forty-eight yards.

heretofore, he gradually sobered down and became thoughtful and penitent.

Then, one day, tidings reached him of a fresh campaign in the East between the Christians and Infidels, and feeling that he could best prove his penitence by striking a blow for the Cross, the emblem of Him he had so long neglected, and whose name he had so frequently taken in vain, he set out at once to the scene of action. He remained there seven years, only returning to England when a truce was declared and hostilities, for the time being, had ceased. On his arrival at Lambton Castle he was told a remarkable story. The queer creature he had caught that Sunday morning seven years ago had grown into a worm or dragon of such monstrous size that it had easily got out of the well, and had migrated thence to the adjacent hill,¹ where it had taken up its abode. Its length was such that it could wind itself three times round the hill, which it only left to go on preying expeditions, and to which it invariably returned as soon as its appetite was appeased. Now, as several whole cows hardly sufficed it for one meal, it very soon exhausted its supply of food in the shape of cows and sheep; but not being particular as to the composition of its menu, it then took to making a clean sweep of every pig sty in the neighbourhood, and if still unsatisfied, it would snap up any human being it caught napping. In short, it terrorized the whole country to such an extent that many brave knights had come from all parts of England to try to fight and kill it, but all had perished in the attempt; and now everyone was asking whom it would victimise next, and if, in the end, anyone at all would be left?

This was the news with which John Lambton was

¹ Fatfield Hill, only twenty-six yards distant.

greeted as soon as he reached home, and to think that he was the cause of it all—for had he not fished that Sunday this tragedy would not have happened—made him feel indescribably miserable.

There was, of course, only one thing for him to do : he must fight the worm as others had done, and either kill it or be killed himself.

Now, there was living in the neighbourhood of Lambton at that time, an old woman reputed to be a witch or wise woman (in these days, it must be borne in mind, England teemed with reputed witches), and John Lambton came to the conclusion that it would be a good thing to consult her as to the best means of overcoming the worm. Accordingly, he set off one evening on foot to the witch's abode.¹ It was at no great distance from the Old Hall, but, all the same, the road leading to it, with which John Lambton was unfamiliar, was silent and deserted, as none dare venture abroad after nightfall, on account of the worm. Consequently, he met no one, and all around him was solitude and silence. Also, the day having been gloriously fine, the dying sunbeams, now shedding their lurid rays from beneath huge piles of wintry clouds, had a curiously gloomy and chilly effect, so that, despite his efforts to keep cheerful, he felt strangely depressed. Indeed, it seemed as if the sky, the shadows, the very atmosphere of the place had all combined together to conjure up in his mind sad and harrowing fancies, and when, just as he was about to pursue his way through a dense cluster of trees, a giant nightbird uttered a loud and dismal croak, he was instantly struck with a sense of fore-

¹ According to Surtees and others, the spot where he actually met the witch and registered his vow to her is near Newbrig (the New Bridge), immediately within the entrance to Lambton Park.

boding, the foreknowledge, so it seemed to him, of some grim and terrible misfortune. Yet, had his soul been at stake, he could not have turned back. Some force, outside himself and over which he had no control, seemed to urge him on. The tall tree tops, waving to and fro in the cool night air, made a melancholy swishing noise, curiously reminiscent of the breaking of wavelets on the seashore on a calm and peaceful summer's night, and, every now and again, he fancied he heard strange mysterious voices whispering to him from out the gloom and shadows.

Pressing fearfully forward, for his nerves by this time were in an extreme state of tension, he presently came to a clearing in the wood, and never in England, at any rate, had his eyes alighted on a wilder and more haggard scene. The long path he had been traversing terminated, and in the space now spread out before him, he could discern the trunks of tall trees, and between them, scattered about in wild profusion, large and grotesquely fashioned boulders, all gleaming, a ghostly, ghastly white in the moonbeams. Wondering whereabouts in this most desolate and forbidding spot the witch woman lived, he was casting his eyes around for some sign of a hut or other habitation, when he suddenly perceived, standing a few yards ahead of him, a tall, gaunt woman, clad from head to foot in black.

There was something so strange and eerie in her appearance that John Lambton started, and his blood ran cold. However, muttering a prayer and crossing himself, he pulled himself together, and calling out, asked her if she could tell him where the Wise Woman of the Valley—as the witch was sometimes styled—lived.

At the same time, so convinced was he that the

figure he addressed was no human, but some spirit of the woods—for like most of the people of this time, he was very superstitious—that he did not really anticipate a reply. Great, therefore, was his surprise and relief when a very harsh but undoubtedly human voice informed him that she was the woman he sought, and that she had been expecting him for some time. Without waiting for him to speak, she then reproached him severely, as being the cause of all the trouble in Wearside, and expressed her willingness to help him slay the dragon, but only on the condition that he promised, on his most solemn word of honour, that he would kill the first living thing he should encounter after he had slain the monster.

“If you break your oath,” she said¹, “no Lord of Lambton for nine generations shall die in his bed. Will you swear?”

“I will,” John Lambton replied, feeling certain, and regretting, perhaps, that he would have to kill one of his beloved hounds, since he could always depend upon them, when given the chance, to run to greet him on his return to the Castle whilst he was yet some distance off.

“So be it then, Lord of Lambton and Knight of Rhodes,” the witch replied. “I will advise thee.” She then told him to instruct his armourer to make him a suit studded all over with steel blades of razor-like sharpness.

“Encased in this suit,” she remarked, “and armed with the sword you have used to such good purpose in the East, victory will be yours.”

Tradition does not say whether John Lambton paid the Wise Woman of the Valley for his advice, but if the witches and wise women of those times

¹ Or words to that effect. Vide Surtees and Sir Bernard Burke.

were anything like their present-day representatives, the professional mediums, we may safely conclude she exacted a fee; a fee, too, that amounted to no inconsiderable sum. However, be that as it may, John Lambton walked home with a lighter heart, and on reaching the Old Hall, he immediately sought his armourer, and ordered a suit of armour to be made according to the witch's instructions. The making of this new suit of armour being at length completed, John Lambton clad in it, and armed with the sword that he had proved to be trustworthy in the recent war, was all ready for the prey; but before setting off to Fatfield Hill, where the dragon was said to be lying in wait for him, he gave certain instructions to his father. He told him that as soon as the fight was over and the monster slain, he would blow three blasts on his horn, not merely as a signal of victory but as a signal that his favourite hound should be loosed, so that it might run to meet him and, accordingly, be killed, in fulfilment of his pledge to the witch, and as his father immediately promised to carry out these instructions, John, eager to attack his enemy, set off, without further delay, to Fatfield.

The dragon was, as usual, coiled round the top of the hill, and a great thrill ran through John Lambton when the monster raised its flat scaly head high in the air and looked down at him.

He had expected it would be a none too pleasant sight, but its appearance was even more sinister and hideous than he had anticipated.

On his approaching the base of the hill, it uncoiled itself, and moving slowly down the slope, after the manner of a great snake, it advanced towards him, its pale eyes gleaming balefully. Pulling himself

together, which he was able to do only by dint of a supreme effort, for the dragon was by far the most terrible opponent he had ever encountered, he stepped out to meet it, his sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. The dragon, then, while still some distance off, suddenly darted forward, and before John Lambton, whom it had thus taken by surprise, could spring aside, it had him in its folds. However, it let him go almost immediately, owing to the pain caused by the blades on his armour slicing off large lumps of its flesh. This was fortunate, but, unfortunately, no sooner had the monster got clear of the blades than the lumps of flesh that had been sliced off its body were reunited with it, and it returned forthwith to the attack, only, however, to be forced to desist, and for the same reason. Again and again this happened, till John Lambton, perceiving that the struggle might go on thus till it resulted in stalemate, that is to say in neither winning, tried new tactics. Backing away from the dragon, he backed and backed till he came to part of the river where the current was strong, and the water, at the same time, well within his depth. There he paused, and still facing the worm, which had followed him step by step, its frightful eyes fixed on him, as if watching for an opportunity to catch him unawares, he backed right into the river. The monster then, thinking no doubt that it had cornered its adversary and that it could easily press him down under water and drown him, once again renewed the attack. As before, the blades on John Lambton's armour sliced off large lumps of its flesh, but as this time these lumps of flesh went into the river, and were swept away by the current, they could not reunite, and the dragon, owing to the bleeding of its wounds, was severely

handicapped. In vain it tried to carry out its scheme. Every effort it made to coil itself round the knight grew more and more futile, whilst the latter ever plied his sword with more and more deadly effect. Though momentarily becoming weaker and weaker, however, it kept on fighting, till it finally bled to death.

The moment it did succumb, and John Lambton had begun to think it never would, he gave a great shout of joy, and blew three loud blasts on his horn. The Lord of Lambton, who was anxiously awaiting the signal, heard them, but forgetting, in his excitement, all about the hound, he ran at once to greet his son, and was thus the first living being John Lambton met after he had slain the dragon. Sadly rebuking his father, he told him to go back to the Castle, and directly he should hear him blow another blast on the Horn to let loose his favourite hound so that he might slay it, and thereby, perhaps, redeem his pledge; but although the Lord of Lambton now did as he was told and the hound was slain, the witch apparently was not pacified. For the doom she had pronounced upon the Lambtons soon commenced to take effect.

I can discover nothing that tends to throw any light on the exact manner of John's death, but presumably he did not die in his bed, and his son Robert, who succeeded him, was drowned near Newbrig¹, close to the spot where John Lambton, his father, had pledged his vow to the witch.

¹ Some say John Lambton erected the Chapel of Bridgeford (spelt also Brigford) on the spot where he pledged his vow to the witch to commemorate his victory. This may or may not have been so, but the Chapel stood close to the New Bridge (Newbrig), and was once used for religious services by the Lambton family. It fell into disuse about the reign of Henry VIII.

With regard to the succeeding Lords of Lambton,¹ apart from the fact that they did not die in their beds, there does not appear to be very much of interest, saving, perhaps, in the case of Sir William Lambton, who fought for the Royal Cause during the Great Civil War and was killed at Marston Moor.

If we begin our reckoning of the nine generations from Sir John Lambton, popularly believed to be the slayer of the worm, and who got his knighthood fighting against Black Pagans and Turks, the ninth generation brings us to General Lambton, stated to be the first Lambton since the commencement of the curse to die in his bed. He, fearing his servants, knowing about the curse, might be tempted to "help it out," kept, according to some, a horsewhip and, according to others, a loaded pistol, always near him when he went to bed, in case of emergency. He lived, however, to a great age and, apparently, died quite peacefully² in his bed, without having resource either to whip or pistol.

He had succeeded his brother Henry as Lord of Lambton, and many believed Henry to be the last Lambton included in the curse. If this were so, and the slayer of the dragon was not John Lambton, but one of his brothers, who succeeded to the Lordship of Lambton before him, or if the said John came into the property not after, but before his brothers, then Henry, brother of General Lambton, would have been of the ninth generation and the curse literally fulfilled, for he died in his carriage, in 1761 while crossing the New Bridge on his estate.

Though the curse is popularly supposed to have died

¹ Vide list given in work entitled, *An Historical and Descriptive View of County Palatine of Durham*, by E. Mackenzie & M. Ross, pub. 1824.

² Vide *Vicissitudes of Families*, by Sir J. B. Burke.

either with him or General Lambton, it is rather a singular fact that, at least, two Lords of Lambton, after the General, died out of their beds and away from the home they so dearly loved.

Commenting on the story of the Lambton Worm, John Surtees writes : " The Lambton Worm belongs to a class of household tales, the genuine appendages of ancient families long occupying the same ground and station ; and perhaps no other certain deduction can be drawn from such legends, excepting that the families to which they relate are of ancient popular relation, against whose subtle meaning the memory of men runneth not to the contrary."

He goes on to say that the worm may have been either some Danish rover or domestic tyrant, and quotes in illustration of the latter the case of the Worm or Dragon of Wantley, which in actuality was a " villainous, overgrown lawyer endowed with all the venom, maw, and speed of a flying eft, whom the gallant Moor of Moor Hall slew with nothing at all but the aid of a good conscience and a fair young maid of sixteen, to annoint him o'er night, when he went to fight, and to dress him in the morning."

However, when we consider that creatures such as the ichthyosaurus, pterodactyl, plesiosaurus, and other equally grotesque and savage creatures really did at one time inhabit the earth, I can see nothing at all inconceivable in this story of a worm or dragon being literally true. The prehistoric creatures I have named did not die off in a day, eons may have passed before they became finally extinct, and, therefore, what more likely than that the dragon of legendary lore was one of them, maybe a surviving saurian destined to become the last of its race.

A thousand years hence, lions and tigers, and

other mighty beasts of prey—they are even now becoming rare—will, in all probability, have become extinct; consequently, in my opinion, any encounter with a survivor of one of these beasts of prey will, in course of time, be deemed mythical, just as mythical, in fact, as John Lambton's fight with the worm, or, to take a case which is to some extent similar, St. George's fight with the dragon.

Hence, I say once again, I can see nothing in any way impossible or irreconcilable with Nature in the tradition of the Lambton Worm. At any rate, be the story of the Worm true or not, there is little doubt that, for some reason or another, the Lambton family did incur a curse, since what was predicted in reference to them up to the ninth generation did actually happen.

CHAPTER IV

THE MIDWIFE'S CURSE

A CURSE, the history of which would, no doubt, seem tragic enough to those it concerns, but to the outside, perhaps, not without a touch of the comic, is that generally known as The Midwife's Curse.¹ The story runs thus :

One of the most prominent families in Jersey during the early years of the seventeenth century were the Paynes, the representatives of whom in the reign of Charles I were the brothers Abraham and Stephen. Both were ardent Royalists, and when the Great Civil War broke out they at once joined the Cavalier forces on the mainland. Stephen became Colonel of the King's Horse. They took part in many engagements, and were always in close attendance on Charles. After his capture and confinement in the Isle of Wight they returned home, and on receiving the news of his execution, they proclaimed his son, Charles, King, from the battlements of Elizabeth's Castle, on which the Royal standard had never ceased to wave. Twice Charles II, when pursued by the Cromwellians, fled to them for protection, and on each occasion they concealed him at the risk of losing not only all their property but their lives. Far from being downhearted during his stay on the island, Charles would seem to have been in extraordinarily good spirits, evincing to the full the

¹ Vide *Rise of Great Families*, by Sir Bernard Burke, pp. 190-202.

keen appreciation of gaiety and amusement conspicuous in his conduct when he came to the throne. Also, as a matter of course, though with as little ceremony as possible and without any ostentation, he held Court and conferred titles and honours with all the dignity and composure of a properly crowned monarch.

Colonel Stephen Payne, his host, naturally acted as his cicerone and guardian, but there were occasions when Charles contrived to give him the slip and wander alone about the Island.

On one of these excursions, according to a well-credited tradition, he met Mdlle La Cloche, whose beauty at once made an impression on his susceptible heart. She is said to have been his first love, and it is just possible that he was, in reality, very deeply attached to her. At any rate, he was seeing much of her, when tidings from England necessitated his quitting the Island and sailing at once for France. On his return, though history is silent on this point, is it not possible that he looked for her, but looked for her in vain? And might not this tragedy account for his subsequent fickleness, his inability to remain faithful to any woman for any length of time? Regarding Mdlle La Cloche, tradition hints at many things, but, in all probability, there is little truth in any of them, and all we know for certain is that the one woman to whom, we are free to surmise, Charles might have been faithful, was, as far as he was concerned, non-existent, for he saw her no more.

Stephen Payne accompanied him, Charles, to France, and made so good an impression on Louis XIV that he made him a Baron of France and a Knight of the Order of St. Michael. Shortly after the bestowal of these honours Stephen returned to Jersey and



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married; and after that, when several months had elapsed, Charles, accompanied this time by his brother James, took refuge on the Island. As before, Charles conducted himself as a reigning monarch, and both Charles and James speedily acquired considerable popularity among the islanders, James (Duke of York and afterwards James II), curiously enough, being of the two rather the more popular. At that period of his life, at any rate, James was not the gloomy individual he is alleged to have been in later years. On the contrary, he was invariably cheerful and sociable, and a certain frankness and free spokenness apparent in him won him friends and made him welcome wherever he went.

With Stephen Payne, James seems to have had much in common, and he told him one evening, over a glass of prime old port, that he would like to be godfather to his first-born, provided the child was a boy. Now, Stephen, whose reverence for Royalty almost amounted to a mania, was, of course, vastly elated. To be able to point to his offspring, the heir of Elizabeth's Castle, and say to his friends and neighbours, "The Duke of York, egad, is his godfather. Isn't he a lucky fellow! No trouble about his future. The Duke will see to that all right," pleased him immensely, and he could have fallen on the Duke's neck, then and there, and embraced him. It was only by a prodigious effort that he prevented himself from doing so, for the port was good, very good, and he and the Duke had drunken somewhat freely of it. Indeed, when he got up the following morning the promise made to him the night before seemed too good to be true, and he was desperately afraid that the whole affair was a fiasco, and that the Duke, when his brain cleared, might repudiate any-

thing he might have said when it was muddled. Being anxious, therefore, to set his mind at rest on this subject, Stephen hastily sought the Duke, and knowing that His Grace was leaving for Paris that afternoon and consequently would have little time to spare, he came to the point at once.

"Was your Grace serious last night in promising to be godfather to my boy?" he asked.

"I promised to be godfather to your first-born, if it is a boy," the Duke responded drily. "You need have no fear, I will keep my promise."

"It will be a boy, Sir," Stephen said solemnly.

The Duke laughed. "Don't be too sure, Stephen," he said good humouredly; "you may be disappointed. All the same I grant you it is an impertinence on the part of Dame Nature to interfere in so personal a matter."

Some interruption taking place just then, not another word was said on the subject, and shortly afterwards the Duke and his Royal brother set sail for France. After they had gone, Stephen Payne thought of nothing but his keenly anticipated child.

"Look here, Abraham," he remarked to his brother one evening, "I have been over to the Lebruns to-day. That tutor, Hicks, they have for Tom seems a nice young fellow, so polite and well informed. They won't want him when Tom is old enough to go to the University, which will be in about six years hence. He would do excellently then for Armand."

"Armand, who is Armand?" Abraham ejaculated.

"Why, Armand is my boy, of course. It is the name I have chosen for him," Stephen replied.

"You mentioned Armand to this tutor?" Abraham enquired.

"Of course I did," Stephen responded. "Why not?"

Abraham smiled.

"I thought I might as well engage him," Stephen went on, "in case he took it into his head to leave the Island, and Colonel Lebrun assured me I could not have done better. He said Hicks had given him every satisfaction."

"Capital!" Abraham observed. "But does not six years ahead seem rather a long time? Besides, supposing, supposing, after all, you are wrong, Stephen, and that your first-born is a girl?"

"Such a supposition is absurd," Stephen said fiercely. "It must, it shall be a boy. I have willed it."

"I hope, I sincerely hope, you are right, Stephen," Abraham ejaculated, as with a somewhat impatient sigh he sought to change the subject.

Having himself selected the room that was to be used as the day nursery, Stephen entered it one day carrying a parcel. "Look here, Douce," he said to the old retainer of the family, who was nursing his wife, and who had acted as nurse and midwife in the family for many years, "see what I have bought for Armand," and quickly undoing the parcel he displayed a collection of toys, consisting of a helmet, and wooden sword, and shield. "Are'n't they fine? I saw them in Town to-day and couldn't resist buying them. Egad, we hadn't toys like these in my young days, had we, Douce?"

Douce was silent, she did not know what to say.

"My word, Douce," Stephen went on, "we shall have to look out for ourselves when he wields that sword. If I'm not mistaken, he'll be trying to cut off our heads with it. How long will it be now, Douce, before the event comes off?"

"It may come off any minute," Douce murmured,

"Your lady suffered considerably during the night, and she never ceases praying that the child may be a boy."

"It will be a boy," Stephen said impatiently.

"It will break her heart if it isn't, poor lady," Douce responded.

The eventful day at last arrived. Stephen Payne had been to a village some little distance away on urgent business, and his first enquiry on his return to the Castle was about his wife.

"Is there any news?" he asked, and the butler, looking very grave and scared, stuttered out:

"Y—es, sir; leastways I—I believe so, sir."

"Fool!" Payne ejaculated furiously, and brushing past the terrified dependent he rushed upstairs to his wife's chamber. At the door stood Douce, white and trembling. "Well!" Stephen exclaimed eagerly. "The news? Has all been satisfactory?"

"Please do not talk loud, sir," she implored, "because the mistress is very weak and must on no account be disturbed."

"Yes, yes," Stephen said impatiently, sinking his voice, "but the boy, Armand, is he a fine child, and does he take after her or me?"

"If you come this way I will tell you, sir," Douce whispered, and crossing the landing she led him, wonderingly, to a large spare bedroom, the door of which was slightly open. The moment they were inside the room, she closed the door softly and standing with her back against it, faltered out: "For the love of God, sir, compose yourself."

"Why?" Stephen burst out furiously. "Can't you speak? Out with it!"

"It's not a boy," Douce faltered, "it's, it's—a girl."

"A girl!" Stephen yelled. "Ten thousand devils! But you are lying, you old harrigan. Tell me the truth or by God I'll——" and seizing her by the shoulders, he shook her till her teeth rattled. Then he flung her back against the door with a crash that brought some of the loose plaster from the wall down and made both the bedroom windows rattle. "The truth," he bellowed, "at once, at once, or damme, I'll kill you!"

"I am speaking the truth," Douce gasped, "and shame on you, sir, for behaving in such a way to an old woman."

"Old idiot!" Stephen shouted. "I wish you, and my wife, and the brat, and everyone in the house in hell! The devil take the cursed lot of you!" And he used such blasphemous language that old Douce was appalled. Never in her whole life had she listened to anything like it, and the fact that his wife was lying, almost within earshot, in a very critical condition, shocked her beyond measure. She wouldn't stir from the door, however, and he had to tear her forcibly away from it before he could get out.

"Don't go near the mistress, you'll kill her if you do, you'll be her murderer!" she called out after him, as thrusting her aside he passed out.

Stephen paused, the word murderer arrested him. It had an ugly sound, and instead of bursting into his wife's room, as he had intended doing, he went downstairs to the dining-room, and pouring himself out a glass of spirits gulped it down with an oath. Another glassfull followed, after which he mounted his horse, and riding like the wind, told the news to Abraham, who lived some little distance away.

That night Douce had a strange dream. She thought that as she lay awake, brooding over the

happenings of that very terrible day, she suddenly perceived, in one corner of the room, a strange, eerie bluish green light. Wondering what it could be she sat up in bed and stared at it. For some seconds it remained stationary, and then commenced moving towards her. When it was about half way across the floor, it paused, and then, suddenly, she found herself looking at a tall figure, clad from head to foot in shining armour. Scared almost out of her senses, she seemed on the verge of fainting, when the figure spoke :

"Don't be alarmed," it said, "I am the spirit of the first Duke of Normandy, and am sent by the Almighty to ask you to deliver a message to Stephen Payne. See him at noon and tell him that, as a punishment for his blasphemy, he and his descendants are cursed. The child he so despises, because of her sex, shall die shortly. No more girls shall be born to him, and for long generations hence no descendant of his shall be blessed with a daughter's love. Will you announce all this to him ? "

"I will," Douce replied, her voice sounding so hoarse and unnatural that she hardly recognized it.

"Very well, then," the figure exclaimed, "I go, and the peace of Heaven be on you." It then vanished, and Douce awoke to find the room in absolute darkness and all very silent. Convinced that the dream was no ordinary dream, but was due to supernatural agency, Douce did not sleep again that night, but lay awake thinking about it till the morning.

Naturally shy and timid, it was only by the exertion of almost superhuman will power that she at length forced herself to fulfil her pledge. Waiting in fearful suspense and agitation till the neighbouring village clock boomed twelve, she entered the drawing-room,

where a number of friends and relatives of Colonel and Mrs. Payne were assembled, and pointing at Stephen exclaimed, in loud solemn tones :

“ Stephen Payne, for your cruelty to your wife and infant daughter, and for your awful blasphemy yesterday, Heaven has ordained me to be the pronouncer of this curse. Your child, she whom you hate and despise, shall be taken very shortly from you. You will never have another daughter, nor will any of your descendants, for many generations to come, ever be blessed with a daughter's love.” She then turned, and, with a dignity that was marvellous in a person of so humble a walk in life, left the room.

What she said was soon verified, for, within a few weeks, Stephen Payne's baby daughter died.

Then came an event which made it seem as if Heaven had relented and was not going to be too hard on Stephen Payne, after all, for, lo and behold, his wife gave birth to a son. Stephen, somewhat cheered by this occurrence, at once informed the Duke of York of it, and although the Duke, obviously, was not bound by any pledge to do so, he stood sponsor, albeit by proxy, at the christening of Stephen Payne's son. This turn in the tide of the Payne's fortunes, however, was not destined to continue uninterruptedly. A Commonwealth force under Michael Lemprière suddenly landed in Jersey, and both Stephen and Abraham Payne, with their families, were obliged to flee for their lives. They went to Devon, and sailed thence to the West Indies, where they settled for good.

As time went on those interested in the curse saw its gradual working out. Stephen Payne never had another daughter, and for six successive generations,

at least, neither had any of his descendants. Whether there are any of this branch of the Payne family still in existence I have been unable to ascertain, but if there are any left, one would like to know if the curse is still in operation.

CHAPTER V

THE PHANTOM OF THE BALL

LONG years ago the picturesque little border town of Jedburgh boasted two splendid buildings, an Abbey, now one of the best preserved and most beautiful ruins in Great Britain, and a Castle, upon the site of which to-day stands a large ugly prison.

Many strange legends are associated with the old Castle, and upon one of the most striking of them, the legend of The Phantom of the Ball,¹ Edgar Allan Poe is believed to have founded his *Masque of the Red Death*.

There are various versions of this legend, but the following appears to me to be the most interesting :

The sun shone one morning, in the year 1285, on a gay company of people gathered together in the great hall of Jedburgh Castle.²

The occasion was that of a Court held there by Alexander III, who, his first wife having died childless, was now seeking a second wife, to help him carry on the Royal line. Scotland then, as now, could show many fair faces, and Alexander's eyes dwelt with approval upon more than one of the beautiful and tastefully attired women assembled there to do him homage. None, however, made the appeal that he considered necessary for his purpose, and he was

¹ *Haunted Houses and Family Legends*, by John Ingram.

² *Vide Castles and Abbays*, published by John Dicks.

beginning to despair of finding just the type of beauty he really admired, when he suddenly caught sight of a tall girl, whose face thrilled him as none had ever thrilled him before. She was a rare type of blonde, her complexion harmonizing perfectly with her hair, which was of the palest shade of gold, and which fell in natural curls over her neck and shoulders. Her nose was small and slightly *retroussé*; her chin firmly but unobtrusively modelled; and her eyes, long in shape and of a beautiful china blue colour, shone with all the fascinating sparkle of youth. At the same time, one might have discerned a certain hardness in their depths, and this hardness, any student of character will tell you, is the surest sign of a cold and calculating nature.

It was not her eyes, however, it was her mouth that first attracted and then held the attention of the King. Now, mouths often make a face or mar it, and the mouth of this fair lady alone won for her a way to the Royal heart. The lips were neither too thick nor too thin; but daintily fashioned and red, with the redness of youth and health, and the teeth were perfectly regular and dazzlingly white. To some people the mouth might have suggested sensuality, and, may be, the King was one of them. Perhaps that is why it so strongly appealed to him. At any rate, the moment he saw it he became obsessed with the wildest and most feverish desire to kiss or to press it to his.

"Who is that lady?" he enquired of the young nobleman standing just behind him.

"The Lady Yolande de Dreux, Sire," was the reply. "She is the daughter of the newly arrived French Ambassador, the Count de Dreux."

"The Count de Dreux whom I am expecting here

this morning, with a message from his Royal master, King Philip ? ”¹

“ The same, Sire. Is she not strikingly beautiful ? ”

“ She is, indeed,” Alexander said curtly. “ Tell my Chamberlain that I wish him to lose no time, but the moment the Count arrives to introduce him and his daughter to me.”

Alexander had not long to wait, for hardly had his message been delivered to the Lord Chamberlain, before there was a flourish of trumpets and one of the Royal heralds announced the entry of the Ambassador of France. A few minutes later, and Yolande de Dreux was standing in the presence of the King of Scotland. Alexander presented a fine figure. Clad in a suit of steel armour, inset with gold, over which a cloak, plentifully embroidered with sparkling gems, was carelessly, yet gracefully, thrown, and wearing a cap from which a white plume floated like a cloudlet, with his youth, his bold, handsome face, his stature and erect mien, he looked every inch a King.

Yolande de Dreux evidently thought so, and a deep blush suffused her cheeks as her eyes met his, fixed on her with an expression of the most intense admiration. From that moment her mind was made up—come what might, she would marry Alexander and wear a Royal crown.

“ I must see you again, fair lady,” he whispered to her, as she prepared to mingle once again with the throng, and the look she gave him, as she murmured, in a low voice :

“ Whenever and wherever it please you, my Lord,” made his pulses throb in a way they had never throbbed before. That night, at a late hour, a woman, hooded and cloaked, might have been seen

¹ Philip IV of France, surnamed Le Bel.

stealing her way, furtively, along a path in the Castle grounds towards a kiosk, the dome shaped roof of which gleamed a ghostly white in the moonbeams. It was Yolande de Dreux and she was on her way to keep an assignation with the young Scottish King. Alexander was in the kiosk, impatiently awaiting her arrival, and catching hold of the little white hand she presented to him, he raised it to his lips and smothered it with kisses.

French women are renowned for the beauty of their hands, and Yolande de Dreux's were beautiful even for a Frenchwoman. Her fingers were long and tapering, and her nails, of an exquisite shape, were polished till they shone like agates. Alexander, who had never before seen such lovely and well-kept nails, went into raptures over them, and for the rest of the evening gazed at them almost without intermission.

Seated close to one another in a charming bower, they were surrounded by every incentive of love. Overhead a glorious moon, resplendent in a sky of deepest blue, thickly studded with scintillating stars, and all around them trees, trees in full leaf and flowers in full bloom. Their environment, in fact, teeming with life, full, passionate life, was not merely conducive to love-making, it seemed almost to compel it.

Nature's silence, for she was now in repose, was broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves, leaves toyed with by the gentle summer breeze that came laden with the delicious scent of flowers and newly mown hay. Such nights make even the most miserable in love again with life, and Alexander, being far from miserable, felt happier than he had ever felt before. Being in this mood then, it was hardly to be

wondered at that, before very long, one of his arms encircled the slender waist of his fair companion. Words of hot, fervent love followed, and then their lips met in a long passionate kiss, to be succeeded by another, and yet another, till both were obliged to desist from sheer exhaustion. But soon, very soon, the King's arms again encircled his beloved, and he was again pouring words of passionate love in her ears, when there was a loud crash in the garden, as of some heavy body falling from one of the trees just outside the kiosk. Yolande screamed with fright, while the King sprang to his feet with an oath.

"A spy, by God!" he shouted. "Only let me catch him and I will slice him in pieces!"

Drawing his sword, he rushed out into the garden, just in time to see a man plunge into the bushes. The King pursued him, but the fellow, having several yards' start and being the faster runner of the two, got away, and Alexander returned to the kiosk in a fury. Feeling no longer in a mood to go on with his love-making, he now bid Yolande adieu, saying he would communicate with her again very shortly.

Vexed beyond measure, for had they not been interrupted, she felt certain the King would have asked her to be his wife, she made her way back to her father's quarters, and, instead of retiring to rest, sat up, plotting and planning till daybreak, the reason being that an obstacle lay in the path of her marriage to the King, which obstacle she must devise a means of getting rid of, no matter whether fair or foul. In a word, Yolande was already engaged to be married, and her fiancé, the young Lieutenant Eranton de Blois, was one of the company of gallant knights and squires who had accompanied the French Ambassador to Scotland. Noble and striking in appearance, he had

been knighted on the battlefield for conspicuous bravery, and belonged to one of the oldest and most highly honoured families in France.

He had fallen in love with Yolande at first sight, and some short time before the mission departed for the Scottish Court he had proposed to her and been accepted, the Count de Dreux thoroughly approving of the match. Possibly, at the time, Yolande had really cared for him, as much as it was in her nature to care for anyone, and she had responded to his overtures with a fervour characteristic of certain French women of a hot, passionate nature, that is apt to get excited, but, after a while, her infatuation for him had gradually diminished, and she now regarded him with a tolerance that almost amounted to indifference. In other words, he bored her, and she was longing for some fresh attraction, something novel, anything or anyone that would once again arouse in her those passionate feelings she so dearly loved.

Then came her meeting with Alexander, and the last lingering sentiment she may have entertained for Eranton vanished the very moment she perceived that the King was in love with her and would, in all probability, make her an offer of marriage. To be the first lady in Scotland, actually to share a throne, that was something like a novelty, something she had never even aspired to in her wildest dreams of acquired wealth and domination.

That Alexander was hopelessly in love with her she was certain, she had read it in his glances, had felt it in his kisses, and she was convinced that she had only to meet him again in private, to be closeted alone with him but for a few moments, and he would ask her to be his wife. She wouldn't leave him,

indeed, until he had done so, and after what had taken place between them, no man of honour—and for a King, Alexander was reputed to be honourable where women were concerned—could fail to do otherwise.

But her father, too, had, she knew, a certain sense of honour. He had given his consent to her marriage with Eranton de Blois, and it might be very difficult to persuade him to break his pledge to the young French nobleman. He was ambitious, however, and therein lay her one chance. She was still considering this as she tripped lightly across the heath separating the French encampment from the venerable Abbey of Jedburgh, whither she was going to confession, when she ran into her father's confidential secretary the Count Montbar.

Montbar was a strange medley of the warrior, scholar, and dandy. Tall, and sinewy, and clad in costly armour that had seen much service in a series of campaigns in Syria, he was bedecked with jewels, and his long dark hair was combed and scented like a lady's. His face, however, belied these touches of effeminacy.

It was long, and lean, and swarthy, with very strongly marked features, and dark sinister eyes that lit up with a curious smile as they now fell on Yolande.

"You are taking an early walk, fair lady," he remarked, pausing in front of her.

"Yes," Yolande replied, "I am going to Mass at the Abbey."

"A most laudable object," Montbar said. "I am on my way to King Alexander, to give him another lesson in French. His Scottish Majesty is most charming, you found him so, did you not?"

The assumed carelessness of his voice was con-

tradicted by the significant expression in his eyes, which told Yolande only too well that he knew a good deal more than he, apparently, did, judging by his words and manner.

"I do not understand you," she said coldly.

"Don't you," he laughed. "Why, I only mean that you seemed to make a great impression on the King when you were introduced to him the other day."

"Is there anything very extraordinary in that?" Yolande observed haughtily.

"Nothing whatever," Montbar said carelessly. "You are so beautiful that one would have to be very curiously constructed not to be impressed. I merely thought when I watched you both, how well matched you were, and how admirably suited you were, in every respect, to be a queen."

He regarded her very intently as he uttered these words, and smiled cynically when he saw her give a slight start.

"Trust me, as you have trusted me in the past, Yolande," he said, in a low voice, edging nearer to her and catching hold of one of her hands. "I can read your thoughts to-day, as well as I used to read them in the past, and I know what is now uppermost in your mind."

"What is?" Yolande faltered, not attempting to release her fingers.

"You wish to be Queen of Scotland," he remarked, "and I can and will help you, conditionally you keep me always near you. Do you consent?"

Yolande was silent. "Meet me here to-morrow at this same hour," she said at length, "and I will tell you."

They then parted, he to go on his way, smiling

cynically, and she to hurry on to the Abbey, her pretty eyebrows knit in deep thought. A few minutes later and Montbar was in the presence of the Count de Dreux. One of his maxims in life was never to delay ; with him to hesitate was to lose, and he began at once, in his usual cautious, subtle manner, to broach the subject he had just been discussing with Yolande.

"Your fair daughter would look well in Royal robes," he said carelessly.

"Meaning——" de Dreux ejaculated, with a start.

"She would make an excellent wife for Alexander," Montbar replied coolly.

"But she is engaged to de Blois," de Dreux exclaimed, "as fine a fellow as ever breathed."

"Alexander is a fine fellow, too," Montbar responded. "A very fine fellow. They are admirably matched."

"It is impossible," de Dreux said.

"Nothing is impossible," Montbar rejoined calmly. "The King is in love with her."

"How do you know?" de Dreux ejaculated, looking at him curiously.

"Anyone with eyes in their head can see it," Montbar observed ; "besides, Alexander told me as much himself. It would be a splendid thing not only for her and for you, but for France."

"It is not to be thought of," de Dreux remarked slowly.

"Isn't it," Montbar responded. "I think I could arrange it all very nicely for you, with Yolande's permission, and, of course, yours," and playing with the handle of his dagger, he smiled coldly.

That evening a September moon, shining with a calm grandeur in a cloudless summer sky, cast its white beams on a little burnside dell, in the centre of which stood a rustic bench, on which were seated, in very close proximity, a man and woman.

The man had one arm round the slender waist of his companion, and was gazing into her beautiful face, upturned to his, with a rapture amounting to adoration.

"Do you love me still, Yolande?" he asked musingly, "because there are times when I think you do not."

"What would you have me reply?" she murmured. "Supposing I said no, what then, Eranton?"

"What then?" Eranton gasped, as if the very idea of such a thing gave him real physical pain. "Why, I should receive a stab deeper than the dagger of any foeman could inflict."

"Would it be so very fatal?" Yolande smiled, her slender jewelled fingers making no response to the gentle pressure of the hand that held them.

"It would kill me," Eranton said shortly. "I should never get over it."

"Other men have recovered from such a wound, Eranton," Yolande persisted.

"Perhaps," Eranton observed slowly, "but they haven't loved as deeply and wholeheartedly as I. But why talk like this to-night? Why such questions, Yolande?"

"Only to apprise you of a possible danger, Eranton," Yolande replied, "but I am merely surmising."

"A danger and merely surmising. You speak in riddles, Yolande," Eranton answered, a stern, perplexed expression stealing over his face, which now

looked very white in the moonlight. "Why do you tease me so? It's cruel of you."

"One has to be cruel sometimes, in order to be kind," Yolande responded lightly, smiling inwardly at his confusion.

Now that the Scottish King had come into her life and all hopes and ambition were centred on him, she hated Eranton, and did not care how she pained him, so long as she did not rouse his ire too much against herself. Knowing, however, how chivalrous he was, and to what a degree he loved her, she felt fairly safe. She might make him angry, but the outcome would assuredly be limited to words.

"I do not understand you, Yolande," he remarked, breaking in upon her reverie. "You cannot surely be thinking that I have a rival? Having pledged yourself to me, you are mine. Therefore, what have I to fear?"

Yolande dropped her eyes. She could not face his searching, steadfast gaze any longer.

"But supposing," she said, "someone else has fallen in love with me, without any encouragement on my part. Someone who is young, handsome, noble and rich, more than that even, someone who holds the very highest position in the land."

"I don't care who he is," Eranton ejaculated, "if he tries to take you from me, I will kill him."

"Even though he be the King," Yolande rejoined softly. She felt him start and quiver all over, as if struck with a sudden ague, then, before she could realize what had happened, he was holding her at arm's length, staring into her eyes, as if he would read her very soul.

"I understand," he said at length. "It is the

true Yolande I am looking at now. What a fool I've been! Go, go for the love of God, before I forget I once loved you and——" He did not finish his sentence, but loosening his hold of her, thrust her away from him. She did not move, a strange feeling of inertia prevented her, and she remained just where he had pushed her, huddled up, her eyes fixed on the ground, seeing nothing. Yet her mind was working furiously and she was wondering what she could do to save herself, should he attempt to kill her.

From afar off came the patter patter of horse's hoofs, and, near at hand, she heard the scurrying of some wild creature, maybe a hare or stoat, through the undergrowth.

A fearful desire to sneeze then came over her. She tried desperately to suppress it, but in vain, and sounding like a veritable explosion in the intense silence, it seemed to awake a never ending series of echoes. Yielding to an impulse she could not resist, she peeped warily round to see what effect her sneezing had on Eranton; but to her surprise he had gone; and on glancing about her, she saw him stalking away in the distance, his armour sparkling like polished silver in the moonlight.

She waited till he had been out of sight some minutes, and then springing to her feet, with a great sigh of relief, was about to quit the dell, when the sudden appearance of a man, encased from head to foot in armour, made her start back in dismay.

"It's only I," a voice, which she at once recognized at Count Montbar's, exclaimed. "Don't go, Yolande, I want to speak to you."

"How you frightened me," Yolande gasped. "Have you been here long?"

"As long as you have," Montbar said coolly. "I

saw you leave the encampment, and guessing you were on your way to meet de Blois, I followed you, thinking it quite possible you might need my help."

"Then you heard what passed between us?" Yolande remarked.

Montbar shook his head.

"No," he replied. "I was too far off for that. I infer from my observations, however, that you gave him his *congé*, and that he took it somewhat differently from how you anticipated he would take it."

"I anticipated nothing," Yolande said coldly. "And I don't care one little bit how he took it."

"Nor what becomes of him?" Montbar observed cynically. "Do you feel any regret?"

"No," Yolande exclaimed, so fiercely that Montbar, despite his imperturbability, started. "I loathe, I hate him."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Montbar ejaculated, laughing. "I can't help feeling amused when it was only the other day you told me you loved him better, a thousand times better, than anyone else in the world."

Yolande frowned.

"I hate him now," she said.

"I believe you," Montbar observed, eyeing her curiously. "What would you like me to do to him?"

"Kill him," Yolande replied, and there was such venom in her voice that once again Montbar started. Hardened and unscrupulous as he was, the intensity of her hatred appalled and almost shocked him, but he quickly recovered.

"You are right," he said, after a slight pause. "It is best to be plain spoken on an occasion like this. I will follow your example. Are you sure of Alexander?"

Yolande nodded.

“And you swear to appoint me Grand Marshal of the Palace, if Eranton dies?”

Yolande nodded again.

“Very well, then,” Montbar whispered. “I will do what you want.”

The shadows of night showed signs of paling in the break of early morn before Yolande and Montbar left the dell and made their way, in guilty silence, to the French encampment.

That afternoon the body of Eranton de Blois, stabbed in the back, was found in a wood near Jedburgh. It was evident he had been taken unawares and murdered in the most cowardly and brutal fashion. The Abbot of Jedburgh insisted on an enquiry being held, but he received little support, and though the finger of suspicion was pointed at several people, including the Count de Montbar, no one was ever brought to book, and in a very short time the affair was practically forgotten.

Some months later great excitement was caused in Jedburgh by the marriage of the King to the beautiful Yolande de Dreux.

The wedding service, which was held in the Abbey, was followed in the evening by a great ball at the Castle, and it was at this ball that the incident which inspired Edgar Allan Poe to write *The Masque of the Red Death* took place.

There had been an interval in the dancing, and the music had only just restarted, when Count Montbar approached Yolande to claim his dance with her. Hardly, however, had she placed her hand in his, before an icy tremor went through her and she clutched him convulsively by the arm. Following the direction of her gaze, Count Montbar saw a tall figure, clad in armour, that was bloodstained, and a

cloak, in which there were rents, obviously caused by the stab of a dagger. The visor of the helmet the figure wore was up, and in the corpse-like features revealed Montbar recognized his victim, Eranton de Blois. He, thereupon, fell to the floor in a fit, and was ever after paralysed in his right side and arm, the arm which had dealt the fatal blow.

The music, of course, stopped, and all eyes were turned in horror on the strangely clad figure, standing erect in their midst.

“Who are you?” the King at length stammered.

“Who am I?” the figure responded. “Ask your wife,” and he pointed his finger at Yolande. “My curse, the curse of the foully murdered, is on her and on you. Within a few months Masses for your soul shall be sung in Jedburgh Abbey, and she shall be left alone. Hated by all her subjects and ever reminded of her crime by that man,” and he pointed this time to Montbar, who was lying on the floor writhing and foaming at the mouth.

The figure in armour said no more, but crossed the hall, with noiseless strides, into an ante-chamber. As the door closed behind it several of the courtiers present, recovering from their terror, drew their swords and rushed after it. On their opening the door of the room, however, no one, nothing was there, and though every nook and corner of the Castle was immediately searched, not a trace of the object they sought could be found.¹

However, what the phantom, for such “the figure” appeared to be, had prophesied came to pass, for a few months after the ball Alexander met with a fatal accident, while riding through the King’s Wood End, Aberdeen, and Yolande, hated by all her subjects,

¹ See *Old Castles and Abbeys*.

who, suspecting her of participating in the murder of Eranton de Blois, rose against her and deposed her, and ever reminded of her crime by the paralysed Montbar, who followed her about like a dog, knew no happiness, and died, when still very young, literally killed by the misery and tortures of a guilty conscience.

Another account of the tradition upon which Poe founded his story asserts that Thomas the Rhymer, hearing that a phantom had appeared at the ball given in celebration of the King's marriage to Yolande, and being acquainted with certain rumours concerning the murder of Eranton de Blois, was inspired by some strange force outside himself to seek the presence of the King and pronounce a curse on him and his bride.¹ I can find no record of the actual words used by Thomas the Rhymer on this occasion, but it is believed that, after informing Alexander that the curse of the Unknown rested on him and his bride for their treatment of Eranton de Blois, he actually stated that "the sixteenth day of March would be the stormiest day that was ever witnessed in Scotland." The weather on the sixteenth of March proving extremely mild, the prophecy was treated with much ridicule and scorn, but the mirth thus aroused soon ceased, when it became known that the King, on that very day, had been thrown from his horse and killed. That, however, was only the beginning of the trouble, since, Alexander leaving no heir, there were several claimants to the throne, and, as a matter of course, civil war ensued.

As has already been stated, Yolande died in

¹ Vide *Haunted Houses and Family Legends*, by John Ingram. Still another version of the story appears in Heywood's *Hierarchic of the Blessed Angels*.

comparative obscurity and great misery, so that, from first to last, the Rhymer's curse was fulfilled.

Before the lapse of many years after these events, Jedburgh Abbey, where the nuptials of Alexander and Yolande were celebrated, fell into ruins, a circumstance that, by many people, was also attributed to the curse.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCREAMING SKULLS OF CALGARTH

HAUNTINGS caused by skulls to which some curse or strange story is attached are by no means uncommon; several occur in various parts of the British Isles. One of the most noted is associated with Calgarth, an ancient homestead near Ambleside, in the English Lake District; and its history is as follows:¹

Many years ago, the old farmhouse of Calgarth was tenanted by its joint owners, a worthy yeoman, called Kraster Cook and his wife, Dorothy. A piece of ground adjoining the farm and forming part of it was much coveted by a near neighbour of the Cooks, a Mr. Myles Phillipson, who, besides being extremely wealthy, was a magistrate, and probably the most influential person in that part of the country. However, although Mr. Phillipson again and again approached Kraster Cook with a generous offer for the above named piece of land, he could not persuade Kraster Cook to part with it. At last Phillipson grew angry, and in a final interview with Cook told him that he'd have the damned piece of ground no matter whether he, Cook, refused to sell it to him or not. Cook, equally angry, swore that he shouldn't have it, and after that the two families were at

¹ Vide "Tales and Legends of the English Lakes," by M. D. Conway, in *Harper's Magazine*, pp. 96-7. Also, *Haunted Homes and Family Legends*, by John Ingram.

daggers drawn. Whenever Cook and Phillipson met they scowled at one another, and whenever Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Phillipson met, they passed each other either with the greatest scorn or a haughty indifference. Then, one day, much to their astonishment, the Cooks received a letter from Mrs. Phillipson inviting them both to a Christmas banquet, and expressing great regret that any dispute should have arisen between them.

"We no longer wish to possess your plot of ground," she wrote, "we are only wishing now to be friends." The letter was apparently sincere, and the Cooks, glad perhaps to be, outwardly at least, on terms of friendship with the great man, accepted the invitation, and when the time came attended the banquet.

Now, they had naturally spent much time and trouble on their toilet (Mr. Cook going to a barber to get his hair cut, instead of to his wife, and Mrs. Cook, instead of patronizing the local dressmaker, going to a new and up-to-date one a long way off), and fancying themselves no little in consequence, they were somewhat astonished to find they were completely outshone by the Phillipsons and their guests, who were wearing the most magnificent dresses they had ever seen, and their admiration knew no bounds when they caught sight of the table. It was spread with spotless linen of the finest texture, and displayed such quantities of both gold and silver plate, that it was only with the greatest difficulty that they could refrain from loud exclamations of surprise.

A large cup of solid silver set exactly in front of Kraster immediately attracted his attention, and he gazed continually at it. He did so not merely because it was obviously of great value, but because the design embossed upon it included the figure of a

horse. Being a breeder of horses, Kraster was naturally a connoisseur in all that concerned them, and as this representation of his favourite animal struck him as correct, even to the smallest detail, he could not resist taking hold of the cup and looking at it very closely.

"You are interested in that cup," Mrs. Phillipson said to him.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "I have never in all my days seen anything like it. In this delineation of a horse every point is so faithfully portrayed. It is simply marvellous."

Several people heard what he said and smiled at his enthusiasm. The banquet over, Kraster Cook and his wife, repairing to the ballroom with the other guests, joined in the dance, and when, as the music finally ceased, they prepared to take their departure, they agreed that never had a party proved more successful from first to last. That it was indeed successful, in a way little dreamed of by them, they had yet to learn.

On the morning after the entertainment, Kraster Cook, once again in his working clothes, was out on his farm, and so engrossed was he, inspecting his sheep, well-fed horses, and famous Alderney cows, that he did not hear the footsteps behind him, and it was not until he was caught hold of roughly by the arms, that he began to realize he was not alone.

Swung forcibly round, he found himself in the presence of half a dozen men, armed with pikes and staves, whom he at once recognized as police officers.

"What's the meaning of this?" he cried. "What do ye want with *me*?"

"Thou knowest very well, Kraster Cook," one of

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the men replied, "and it's no use thee struggling. We have orders to take thee and thy wife to prison."

"To prison!" Kraster gasped in astonishment. "Thou art joking, man."

"A sorry joke t'will be for thee, Mr. Cook," one of the other men chimed in. "That party last night up at the Hall will prove the most mirthless one thou and thy good lady were ever at."

The man was right, for when the Cooks were brought into the Court room that afternoon and forced into the dock, they found that they were charged with stealing the large silver cup Kraster Cook had admired so much at the previous night's banquet.

It had been lost, and found in the Cooks' house. Of course, they were innocent, and it was all a plot on the part of the Phillipsons, but the result was inevitable.

Myles Phillipson tried the case himself, the witnesses for the prosecution were one and all in his pay, and both prisoners were promptly found guilty and condemned to death.

Before they were removed, Dorothy Cook asked to be allowed to speak, and permission being granted (of necessity, since, according to the custom of those days, it could not be withheld), she leaned on the rail of the dock, and fixing her eyes on Myles Phillipson spoke thus: "Guard thyself, Myles Phillipson. Thou thinkest thou hast contrived cleverly; but that very piece of land of ours thou covetest will prove the dearest a Phillipson has ever bought. Failure will attend thee in whatever thou undertakest; and a day will come when no Phillipson will own a tittle of land in all this county.

More than that, Myles Phillipson, and mark this

well—we'll haunt ye, ye and all your breed, so long as two walls of our old farm house—the house I know ye want to live in—are left standing. Never will ye be rid of us."

She said no more, but still glaring at Myles Phillipson, who merely smiled, she was led, in company with her husband, out of the court room and back to the prison.

A few weeks later Kraster Cook and his wife were executed. Then, on the plea that they had owed him money, Myles Phillipson immediately seized their property, and after extensive alterations had been done to the old farm house, he and his family moved into it.

Some months later, the whole household were awakened one night by a series of the most appalling screams, coming, apparently, from somewhere in the upper part of the house. For some time no one dared move. At last, however, Myles Phillipson, urged on by his wife, who was now calling him a coward, got up and, arming himself with a poker, ventured on to the landing. Directly he did so the screaming ceased; and there was no sound, saving the gentle tapping of ivy on the glass of the oriel window at the far end of the corridor, and nothing to be seen but the cold moonbeams and the calm immovable canvas faces of his ancestors hanging on the walls. He took a few steps in the direction of the staircase leading to the landing overhead, but finally came to a halt, intimidated by the gloom and stillness and a something in the atmosphere of the building that was wholly new to him. Seized with something akin to panic he stole fearfully back to his room, and nothing his wife said or did could persuade him to leave it again that night. Of course, everyone talked about the scream-

ing in the morning, and soon after breakfast something occurred to furnish the household with further grounds for discussion and speculation.

Mrs. Phillipson was sitting alone in the drawing-room reading, when she heard, or fancied she heard, one of the children crying in the nursery overhead. She at once laid aside her book and ran upstairs. Her route across the landing led her by a small and gloomy flight of wooden stairs leading to several attics, used chiefly for lumber, and she was passing this staircase when a strange noise, coming, apparently, from the attics, made her halt. Curious to ascertain the cause of it, she commenced climbing the attic stairs, but had barely got half-way up them, when she was brought to an abrupt halt. On the landing immediately above her was a low balustrade, and perched on it, side by side, and grinning down at her, were two ghastly skulls, one crowned with short stubby hair, and the other with very long hair, all matted and mildewy.

As she gazed at the spectacle in horror and amazement, the skulls slowly opened their mouths and emitted screams, so harsh and bloodcurdling and altogether diabolical, that she at once fainted. All in the house fortunately heard the sounds, and Myles Phillipson, feeling comparatively brave now that it was daylight, immediately summoned the servants and, accompanied by them, searched the premises. Nothing was discovered till the party arrived at the attic staircase, when they, one and all, received a dual shock. Lying in a dead faint at the foot of the stairs was Mrs. Phillipson, while on the balustrade, gleaming a sickly yellow in the sunbeams, were two ghastly skulls, grinning hideously.

When, however, Myles Phillipson and his servants

at length summoned up the courage to ascend the staircase and obtain a nearer view of the skulls, they were found to be quite material; and when a subsequent disinterment of the Cooks' bodies revealed the startling fact that they were headless, the identity of the skulls was, of course, fully established. They were, without question, those of Kraster Cook and his wife, Dorothy.

Myles Phillipson immediately had the skulls reinterred.

"Nothing further will occur now," he told his household. "I shall have the graveyard watched." He was wrong, however, for that very night, soon after everyone had retired to bed, the same awful screams were once again heard, and in the morning the two skulls were found, as before, looking down from the balustrade on the attic landing.

Endless attempts were now made by Myles Phillipson to get rid of the skulls, but all proved futile. No matter whether he threw them into the lake, burned or broke them, the result was the same. They invariably returned to the old farm house, not a whit the worse for all their harsh treatment. And at night the screaming also continued. Every member of the household was terrified at it, and the whole story, soon getting known, the Phillipsons came in for a very bad time. They became, in fact, so shunned and disliked by everybody, that, in the end, they lost all their money and were obliged to sell the property and quit the neighbourhood. What subsequently became of them is not known. The old farm house, however, remained haunted, and on that account no one stayed in it for long. Among its numerous occupants was Dr. Watson, Bishop of Llandaff. I'



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is said that he laid the restless spirits for a while, but that, after he left, the disturbances broke out again. I am informed that the original old farm house now no longer exists, in which case the two screaming skulls have doubtless disappeared, too. "

CHAPTER VII

SHERBORNE CASTLE

“**W**HOSOEVER shall take these lands from this Bishopric of Salisbury, or diminish them in great or small shall be accursed, not only in this world, but in the world to come, unless in his lifetime he makes restitution thereof.”

These, tradition affirms, are the words uttered by Osmund, King of Wessex, when he presented the original Castle of Sherborne and the land attached to it to the Bishopric of Sherborne, which dated back to about the year A.D. 704. In laying the curse, Osmund was creating no precedent, since it was the custom in those turbulent and lawless times so to threaten anyone who dared to interfere with Church property. Now, whether it was due to the threat contained in the said curse or not, the Church, it seems, remained in peaceful possession of the property thus bestowed on it by Osmund, King of Wessex, for many years, and it was not until the reign of Stephen that any attempt was made to wrest it from its rightful owners. What happened then was this :

Roger, Bishop of Salisbury (the See of Sherborne had, apparently, been merged in that of Salisbury), pulled down the original Castle of Sherborne, which had become very dilapidated, and erected on its site another castle, which, judging by its ruins, must have been a very fine example of late Norman architecture. He also built similar castles at Devizes and Malmes-

bury respectively.¹ Now, as he was known to be in sympathy with Queen Matilda, Stephen's most bitter foe, Stephen not unnaturally watched the building of these castles with considerable suspicion, and, as soon as they were finished, he quietly seized both them and their owner, at the same time fining the latter very heavily.

For these acts, which in the eyes of the Church were most sacrilegious, he was called upon to appear before Henry, Bishop of Winchester. He did not go himself, but sent, as his representative, Aubrey de Vere, the Royal Chamberlain. The proceedings, as far as Stephen was concerned, proved futile enough. He was censured by the Bishop. This he had, of course, expected, but he stuck to the castles, which he never intended giving up and which now became the property of the Crown.

When, however, shortly after the affair at Winchester, de Vere was slain and Stephen taken prisoner, believers in the efficacy of the curse declared it was taking effect, and they became even more convinced when, on the top of these disasters, Eustace, the King's eldest son, died,² and Stephen, overwhelmed with grief at his loss, tamely accepted the terms offered him by Matilda. When Stephen's reign terminated, Sherborne Castle and the land attached to it passed into the hands of the Montague³ family, who retained it till the time of Edward III, when its restoration to the Church was brought about in a somewhat strange fashion.

Robert Wyvill, Bishop of Salisbury, brought a writ against Montague, 1st Earl of Salisbury, for the

¹ Vide *The History and Fate of Sacrilege*, by Sir Henry Spelman.

² He was believed to have been poisoned, presumably by an agent of Matilda.

³ Termed also the Montacutes.

estate of Sherborne, and on the latter snapping his fingers at him, he challenged him to trial by combat.

The Earl laughed. Being a stalwart warrior, who had seen much service, the idea of fighting with an elderly ecclesiast struck him as humorous in the extreme. However, his smile received a check when, on arriving at the place selected for the fray, he saw the bishop, no poor decrepid thing staggering under the weight of his armour and with difficulty wielding a sword, but a man as big and brawny as himself, and armed to the very teeth.

The two, in fact, appeared to be very evenly matched, and the crowd of onlookers were anticipating a very thrilling fight, when, to their surprise and disappointment, the King suddenly appeared on the scene and forbade the contest. He then settled the dispute in this wise :

The Earl was to hand over the Sherborne estate at once to the Bishop, who, in return for it, was to pay the Earl 2000 marks.

Neither party seemed altogether pleased, but they, nevertheless, thought it prudent to concur, and so the matter ended.

Despite the fact that the Bishop had had to pay for the restoration of his property, the issue of the dispute was regarded by the clergy as a great victory for the Church, and their appreciation of Roger Wyvill may be seen in the monumental brass erected to his memory in Salisbury Cathedral.

He is depicted thereon clad in his canonical robes, with mitre on head, and hands folded as if in the act of prayer, the background to this picture consisting of a rather quaint looking castle, presumably Sherborne. Immediately in front of the castle, apparently guarding the entrance to it, is the figure of a man in

scanty attire, holding a shield in one hand and a kind of miner's pick in the other. It is thought that this figure is intended to be a portrait of Roger, in the rôle of Champion of the Church, armed and ready to fight anyone who dares to lay a finger on Sherborne Castle. Be this as it may, the figure is a decidedly comic one, its comicality being greatly enhanced by the appearance in the foreground of the picture of several rabbits, apparently at play.

Oddly enough, the Montague family would seem to have been still under the ban of the curse when they were no longer owners of Sherborne Castle; indeed, they would seem to have suffered more when they had given it up than when they possessed it. And one wonders if this were due to the fact that they did not actually restore the property, i.e. make restitution, since they received payment for it. I append a list of their misfortunes. The first Earl of Salisbury, being taken prisoner by the French and treated shamefully, was killed in a tournament. The second Earl, by a terrible mischance, killed his favourite son.

He was teaching the youth to tilt, in preparation of some coming sports, when he accidentally ran the point of his lance in the boy's eye, with the result that he killed him on the spot. The third Earl fell into the hands of a Cirencester mob, who, after insulting and torturing him, struck his head off; while the fourth and last Earl was killed at the Siege of Orleans.

He was looking out of a window of a castle, early one morning, watching the operations, when a cannon ball struck the wall of the building, and a piece of masonry, flying off, hit him on the head, and wounded him so seriously that he died. Now, although, with this Earl's death, the Earldom in the family ended, a

circumstance which served, perhaps, to render their connection with Sherborne Castle still more remote, tragedy, as the following story will show, still continued to be associated with the name of Montague.¹ It happened, the story I am about to narrate, in the early days of Katherine of Aragon's marriage with King Henry VIII, when he was still apparently greatly attached to her, and before, of course, he came under the spell of the fair Anne Boleyn's eyes.

Katherine was very fond of riding, and used frequently to sally forth on her favourite mare for a day's hunting with the falcon. On these occasions she was usually accompanied by a young esquire, one of the Montagues, who held the post of Master of the Horse. Very impressionable and romantic, Montague fell crazily in love with the Queen, but did not dare breathe a word of passion to her or even hint at his feelings for her either by a look or sigh. The only thing he did permit himself to do was to give her hand a very gentle pressure as he helped her mount and dismount; and on these occasions he invariably fancied the pressure was returned. Now, Katherine's upbringing had been very strict. Parental authority in Spain was very firmly exercised in those days, and Spanish etiquette and training of the young did not permit any interchange of hand pressures between the sexes. Indeed, no liberties of any kind were allowed till after marriage. Hence Katherine, being greatly mystified at the conduct of her escort, ran one day, with all the thoughtless gaiety of a child, to seek the counsel of her husband.

"Tell me, Sire," she said, "what a gentleman in this country means when he squeezes a lady's hand."

¹ The Montague referred to in the story was, in all probability, a collateral descendant of the first Earl of Salisbury.

"Ha, ha!" the King roared, "but you must first tell me, chick, does any gentlemen squeeze your hand?"

"Yes, sweetheart," the Queen replied innocently, "My Gentleman of the Horse."

The King laughed, but said nothing.

Katherine never saw Montague again, however, for he was at once ordered abroad, to take part in a campaign then in course of progress on the Continent. A few days after he arrived at the front, an attack was made on the enemy's lines. Montague begged to have the privilege of leading it. The privilege was granted, and fighting desperately in the forefront of the battle, it was not long before he fell, fatally wounded.

His faithful followers carried him to his tent, and before he died he wrote in blood, his own blood: "To Queen Katherine: Madam, I die of your love."¹

To revert to Sherborne. The castle and estate was held uninterruptedly by the Church till the reign of Edward VI, when it was given by the King, in 1540, to his uncle, the Duke of Somerset, who was acting as Lord Protector. Somerset did not live to enjoy it long, however, for, his enemies proving too strong for him, he was arraigned on a trumped-up charge of treason and executed. Thus, it will be seen, the curse was still operating. The King then gave the castle and lands to Sir John Horseley,² who held them till Mary ascended the throne, when they were restored to John Capon, Bishop of Salisbury, who, nevertheless, had to pay two thousand marks for them, that sum representing, apparently, the estimated value of the estate, since it was the sum paid for it by that former Bishop of Salisbury, Robert Wyvill.

¹ Vide *Picturesque England*, by L. Valentine, pp. 166-8.

² Vide *The History and Fate of Sacrilege*.

But again, before many years had elapsed, Sherborne Castle and its adjoining land were wrested from the Church, for in 1591 Queen Elizabeth gave the estate to Sir Walter Raleigh.

He, it seems, held it till 1618, when he met with exactly the same fate as Somerset; that is to say, he was both deprived of his property and beheaded, the curse in this instance, it would seem, working impartially. The disputed castle and lands were then allotted to Prince Henry, son of James I, but as he died within a year of receiving them, they soon became again the subject of contention.

Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, who had long coveted the estates, on the pretext that he had found a flaw in the deeds in which Sir Walter Raleigh had settled the castle and lands on his son and heir, petitioned James I to give them to him; and James, with whom he was a great favourite, immediately granted his petition.

Lady Raleigh, then full of indignation at the mean trick played upon her by Carr, in order to possess himself of the property that should have been her son's, interviewed the King on her son's behalf. It was of no use, however, the King, with his usual obstinacy, would not go back on his word to Carr, and, consequently, Lady Raleigh, bitterly resenting the injustice done to her, cursed those who were responsible for it. And apparently her curse took effect, for, soon after its pronouncement, Carr was committed to the Tower, charged with participation in the murder of his friend, Sir Thomas Overbury.

It is true he escaped, thanks again to the King's influence, the fate that befell the pretty Mrs. Turner and other of his less fortunate agents, but his subsequent life was full of unhappiness, his love for the

woman, for whose sake he had connived at the murder of his best friend, soon turning to mistrust and hate, and she very heartily reciprocating these sentiments. For the sake of appearances, however, they lived together and posed as a fairly happy and contented couple. Their daughter, Lady Anne Carr, and to whom, to do them credit, they were both devoted, was as sweet and gentle as she was beautiful, and does not appear to have inherited any of their live propensities.

They naturally took care to keep the terrible tragedy in which they had both been implicated a secret from her, and it was only by a strange chance that she eventually learned of it.

She was on a visit to her parents, shortly after her marriage to Francis, Lord Russell, and going one day into the library to find a book with which to while away the time, she alighted on a pamphlet she had never seen there before. It was an account of the trial of her parents and their agents for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury.

Some time later, when her father went into the library, he found her lying insensible on the floor with the pamphlet by her side.

It was said she never quite recovered from the shock of learning that her beloved father and mother had played such an infamous part in the Overbury tragedy. And, in all probability, the rumour had a certain foundation in truth, since there is little doubt that the discovery she had made preyed upon her mind, which must, in consequence, have been to some extent affected.

Subsequently, Sherborne Castle passed into the possession of the Earl of Bristol, the youngest son of Sir George Digby. At his death, which occurred, in

1650, in Paris, where he was interred in the common burial place of the Huguenots, it passed to his son, George. George left two sons, John and Francis. John came into the title and estates of Sherborne, Francis was killed in the Dutch War of 1672. As neither left any issue, the property went to their nearest of kin, also a Digby, and it has remained in the Digby family ever since.

With the Overbury murder, the curse connected with this property seems to have reached a climax, and in that climax to have worked itself out; at any rate, since the Carrs, no non-ecclesiastic owners of Sherborne Castle seem to have been cursed with tragedy in a greater measure than is common to us all.

CHAPTER VIII

DREAD CORUIISK

EVEN in the daytime Coruisk has a weird and awful look. It is a lake of green water, surrounded by rugged precipices, the bases of which are strewn with all manner of fantastically fashioned rocks and boulders. Giving it a still grimmer character, all around it stand dark, stern, and silent mountains that impress one with the idea they are listening, and listening they must be, or else why do they echo one's voice in such a strange and altogether unusual way. They seem to possess some secret, to brood over some unutterable idea which the human listener can never know, to be imbued with a life, a subtle, secret life, with which mere mortal can never intermeddle.

The savage grandeur of Coruisk, which lies close to Loch Scavaig, another wild and romantic spot, in the Island of Skye, off the West Coast of Scotland, has, perhaps, no parallel in the British Isles. It is generally deemed one of the most ghost-ridden lakes in the British Isles, and those who venture near its waters in the dead of night not infrequently experience harrowing happenings. Indeed, if anyone wants to come in contact with the Unknown, Coruisk is about as likely a place as any to furnish them with the fulfilment of their desire. It does not boast of one haunting but many, and these, if one may place any credence in rumour and report, are, even now,

constantly occurring. As one might expect, there are endless stories and traditions connected with this place, and this is one of them :¹

Many years ago there lived in the Island of Skye, on the borders of lonely Loch Scavaig, three sisters, Alisa, Elsa, and Mary Mackie. They were all three pretty, in different styles. Alisa, the eldest, was tall, with raven black hair and eyes, almost classical features, and an expression of extreme haughtiness. Elsa, the middle one, had flaming red hair, sapphire blue eyes, a *retroussé* nose, and a dainty disdainful mouth ; whilst Mary, the youngest, was a blonde, though not of the most pronounced order, since her eyebrows and eyelashes were dark and her hair the deep rich colour of ripe corn. She had blue grey eyes, small delicate features, and a singularly beautiful mouth. They were all, alike, slim, as true Celtic maidens usually are, their feet were small and slender, and their hands so lovely that they were the envy of all the other women on the island. Indeed, three more perfectly lovely maidens to look at one could not possibly imagine. Of course, they had numerous admirers, but being perfectly aware of their charms, and rating them at their full value, they declared they would only marry men who were very rich and, at the same time, unusually handsome.

Well, one evening, tired with wandering aimlessly about the shores of Loch Scavaig, they sat down and asked one another what they should do to relieve the general monotony.

"I want a thrill," Alisa said. "I am weary to death of this everlasting sameness. Can't you suggest something, Mary ?"

¹ This story cannot be verified by any written record. It is a tradition that has been handed down merely by word of mouth.

Mary knit her pretty bows for a moment and thought deeply. "I've got it," she said at length, "let us take a walk into the wood over there," and she pointed to a dense growth of pines in the distance, "and consult old Mother Macpherson."

"Not the witch woman?" Elsa ejaculated, turning pale.

"Why not?" Mary laughed. "She will not eat us. And what harm, after all, is there in asking her to tell us the Future?"

"What would Father Anthony say?" Elsa responded, crossing herself.

"He needn't know," Mary laughed. "What do you say, Alisa? You want a thrill, and I have proposed something which may give you one."

"I'm game," Alisa replied. "Put your qualms in your pocket, Elsa, and come along."

"Oh, all right," Elsa remarked, rising from the stone on which she had been seated and winding her shawl tightly round her, for the air was getting chilly. "I'll come, but recollect, if anything happens, I have warned you."

"Tut, tut," Mary said pertly. "What can come of it? It's only a bit of fun."

They then set off.

By and by they arrived at the wood, the sun had almost reached the horizon, the sky was fast paling, and the shadows of the great gaunt trees were beginning to fall athwart the narrow winding path that led to the old witch woman's habitation. Robbers and wild animals being unknown in Skye, the girls had little to fear from the Material, and they plunged beneath the trees, singing and laughing gaily. Presently, however, the evening shadows darkened and the forest became enveloped in a deep and silent gloom.

"I don't much like this," Elsa remarked, drawing closer to Alisa and peering somewhat timidly at a tree-trunk that shone a ghostly white in the waning daylight.

"Pooh," Mary exclaimed, kicking aside a toad with her pretty little foot. "Pooh, you are surely not afraid of the dark!"

The next moment she started herself, as a night bird, almost immediately above her head, gave a dismal croak, and with a loud flutter of wings flew slowly away. At last, at no great distance ahead of them, they perceived a light, and hastening on, they soon came to a rude hut, on the threshold of which sat an enormous black cat, with big, green eyes that shone like emeralds.

"Out of the road, you nasty creature," Mary said, giving it a sharp cut with a stick she had just picked up. "You are one of old Mother Macpherson's familiars, I'm sure."

"You are right," a harsh voice called out from within. "He is one of my familiars, therefore have a care. Walk in, all three of you, and tell me what I can do for you." The three girls obeyed, and found themselves in the presence of a most peculiar old woman, who was sitting on a stool in front of a wood fire, stirring something in an iron pot. She had a big head, almost bald, a long curved nose, more like a parrot's beak, two big pale eyes, that gleamed evilly as they alighted on Mary, and a huge mouth, which, when open, revealed two or three long yellow teeth. Altogether, she was a singularly hideous and grotesque-looking creature, and her visitors thought it small wonder that the people of Skye regarded her as being in league with the Devil. Elsa shrank back in terror at the sight of her, and even the usually bold and fearless Mary came to an abrupt halt.

"Highly tighty," the crone croaked, her voice rivalling that of the night bird for hoarseness. "Highly tighty, the three pretty wenches of Scavaig are afeared of me, I do believe. Come, come, I am not a viper going to sting or bite you. I'm neither a viper nor a wild cat. Sit ye doon, sit ye doon," and she pointed with a skinny finger to an antique chest that was ranged against one of the walls. "Now, once again, what can I do for you, what do you want of me?"

"We want to know our fortunes," Mary said, "and we will cross your hand with a silver penny if you will tell us."

The hag emitted a ghastly sound, intended to be a chuckle.

"Marry," she said, thrusting out a long arm and crooking her spidery fingers till they resembled more than ever the claws of some unsavoury bird of prey; "Marry, if you want to know your futures, you must go at midnight to the cliffs overlooking dark Coruisk and work spells."

"Coruisk!" Alisa faltered, "and at midnight! It is out of the question."

"Then your futures will remain unrevealed," the hag responded with a frightful grin.

"Is there no other way?" Mary asked.

"None," the beldame answered, calling the black cat to her side and tickling its neck with her long curved nails. "None."

The girls consulted together for a while, and then Mary, acting as spokesman, addressed the witch:

"We will go to Coruisk at the hour you name," she said, "if we can work the spells. What are they?"

"Ha, ha!" the hag laughed. "You will be able

to work the spells all right," and she then told them what to do. They must mark out a circle on the ground, she said (and she forthwith instructed them exactly how to do it), kindle a fire in the centre of the circle, and boil certain of her preparations in a tin pot over it, whilst they chanted in chorus certain incantations. (These incantations she made them repeat till they could say them without a mistake). When you have done all this," she went on, "if nothing happens, then throw this powder into the fire," and she handed Mary a small packet.

"Thanks ever so much," Mary responded, taking the packet and glancing curiously at the various things the old witch was collecting together for them. "Here's another penny——"

"I don't want any more money from you," the hag muttered, "I shall have my reward later on," and she gave vent to a peal of such diabolical laughter that Alisa and Elsa shivered and clung tightly to each other. In a few minutes she had completed her selection, and, handing the articles to the girls, she bade them act boldly and not give way to foolish fancies. She then dismissed them with a wave of her hand.

As they left the hut, an owl hooted dismally and a dog in the far distance howled. Threading their way along a narrow winding path, and frequently tripping over brambles and stones they could not see in the dark, they eventually emerged from the wood, and after crossing a bleak open space, took a rocky track that led direct to the margin of Coruisk. Keeping very close together now, the girls soon caught sight of the lake, gleaming and glittering in the moonbeams. The circle of lone dark mountains in the background gave the lake somewhat the appear-

ance of an amphitheatre, or rather the ghost of one, for the silence overlying it was comparable only with that of the grave. Elsa would have turned tail and run, had she but dared detach herself from Mary, and Alisa, too, would have fled, had she not feared Mary's scorn.

"Come along," Mary said, catching hold of her sisters by the arm, "let's find a level bit of ground, mark out the circle, and kindle a fire. What fun!" She looked about her as she spoke, and then, suddenly darting forward, shouted, "I've found it. Just the very spot. A nice little plateau surrounded by rock."

Working hard they soon completed the circle and were ready to start on the next item of their programme. As nothing that might serve as fuel, nothing in the shape of tree or shrub, ever grew in the immediate vicinity of Coruisk, the witch had given the girls several bundles of faggots, and with these they now started to light a fire. They had no trouble, it burnt up briskly, and soon the tin containing the witch's preparations, which they had placed on it, began to simmer. They then duly recited the witch's incantations, and as the minutes sped by, the hush on the mountains intensified and the glimmer on the surface of the still waters grew more and more ghostly. However, there seemed to be no sign of anything unusual happening, and Mary, whose patience was soon exhausted, took the packet the old hag had given her from under her bodice and threw it into the flames.

"There, now," she said, "let's see what you can do."

The moment the packet reached the flames there was a fizz, succeeded by a curious hissing sound, and the next instant the whole spot was illuminated by an eerie blue light.

"God in Heaven, what's that!" Alisa cried, clutching hold of Mary and pointing to a shadowy form standing opposite her in the moonlight.

It was about seven feet high, but so vague and indistinct that the sisters could get no definite idea as to its actual appearance. It struck them as being very grotesque and sinister, with something like a horn or horns on its head. Silent and motionless it confronted them, and they stared at it, too terrified and dumbfounded either to move or speak. Then suddenly it spoke :

"Well, what is it?" it said, and its voice, soft and insinuating, thrilled them immeasurably.

"Who are you?" Mary faltered.

"Someone you will all know very well one day," it answered. "Why do you come here, what do you want?"

"We want to know our futures," Mary stammered, making a desperate effort to appear calm. "Will you tell us them?"

"I!" the "figure" said mockingly. "Why ask me to tell you them? And yet who else should you ask, since I AM your futures. Let that suffice. Would you each like a present, say a golden bracelet? I can offer you nothing more at present till you have been tested."

"I would like a bracelet," Mary said, for her somewhat shyly.

"And I, too," echoed Alisa and Elsa, more shyly.

A curious laugh, long and low, came from the "shadowy figure." "I knew you would," it exclaimed. "I know you better than you think, all of you. Well, if you promise to do as I wish, you shall each receive a pretty bangle to-morrow."

"What have we to promise?" Mary asked,

becoming bolder now that she saw no immediate harm to them was intended.

"You have to promise, nay, to swear," the "figure" replied, "that you won't mention a word of what has happened to-night to anyone, and that you will come here again at the same hour, exactly a month hence, and bring with you some living object, which you will kill and throw into the lake, before commencing to work the same spells you have so admirably worked to-night. Will you swear to do this?"

"I will," Mary said at once. "I suppose if we kill a mouse or a rat, it will do?"

"Anything that lives and feels will suffice," the "figure" responded. "Alisa and Elsa, what have you to say, will you swear, too?"

Elsa hesitated. She did not like anything that was secret or mysterious, but in the end she was overruled by Mary, and eventually both she and Alisa, upon whom Mary had to practise all her powers of persuasion, agreed to the condition named, and swore to fulfil them. The "figure" then bade them adieu for a month, and the three girls, whose gaze, almost without intermission, had been fixed on the shadowy "figure," now saw it very slowly recede, until eventually it was completely lost to sight. Greatly mystified and asking each other's opinion as to the meaning of it all, and whether it could possibly be a hoax, they walked as fast as they could home.

The following day a wooden box, directed to Miss Alisa Mackie, was found outside the front door of the old manse where they lived, and upon opening it, they were amazed beyond measure to see three beautiful snake bangles of gleaming solid gold. This

was the beginning of it all. Eager to get more presents, they impatiently awaited their next midnight visit to Coruisk, and when the day and hour at length arrived, they stole stealthily out, and after assuring themselves that they would not be seen, they ran with all possible speed to the lake.

Not being able to catch a mouse, they had brought a cat to kill and throw into the lake, and when this feat had been accomplished (all three took a hand in strangling pussy), they worked the same spells as they had worked before, and the shadowy "figure" again appeared.

"Well, how did you like your presents?" it enquired, and after receiving an affirmative reply from the three girls, it told them they should receive bracelets on the morrow, provided they agreed to come again to Coruisk in a month's time, and kill and throw into the lake something else and repeat the same spells. The girls promised, this time without any hesitation.

The next day they again found a box on the doorstep of their house. It contained three beautiful golden bracelets, which they at once slipped on their pretty wrists. The craze for possession now seized them, and their one and only thought was what and how much they could get. Before their visit to the witch they had all been, at least, tolerably kind and sympathetic, but since then, and especially since their encounter with the shadowy "figure," their natures had undergone a change, and they had become hard and callous, so much so that the one time gentle Elsa asked Mary one day, quite casually, "what they should kill next?"

Mary laughed. "Why Elsa," she said, "you are getting as bad as I. You were horrified when I

suggested killing poor pussy, though when the time came you took a very active part in the assassination, and now you ask, in the most cold blooded way, 'what we shall kill next?' A fowl, I think, would give us as little trouble as anything. It is very easily killed, and death in its case would merely take place somewhat prematurely. What do you think?"

Elsa thought Mary's idea excellent; indeed, she now thought everything Mary said and did was right; and when the time came, the fowl was duly sacrificed, and presents, as usual, followed.

But now their greed grew apace, and the next time they went to the lake at midnight they asked the "figure" for money. It agreed to give it them, making, however, a proviso.

"For money," it said, "you must kill something more important than a trumpery cat or fowl. My presents to you depend on the nature of your victim."

With an eagerness which they themselves realized was appalling, they promised to bring a larger animal next time, and they went away, debating among themselves what that animal should be. Finally, they decided on a blind dog belonging to one of their neighbours. It howled and whined piteously when they dragged it to the margin of the lake, but the thought of what would be theirs on the morrow made them steel their hearts, and they showed it no mercy.

The reward bestowed upon each was a purse full of gold. After many more dogs had disappeared, and sheep had followed suit, the sisters became so rich that they left their aged parents and built a fine house for themselves close to the modern town of Broadfeet. People, of course, talked and asked where all the Mackie wealth came from, but none

suspected the truth, or in any way associated the Mackies with the constant disappearances of animals, which was attributed to a vulture, that was said to have its nest on gloomy Ben Glaavin. By and by, the sisters grew tired of purses of gold, and told the "figure" they wanted something different.

"I will send you each a necklace of diamonds that a queen might envy," it replied, "if," and here its voice became very, very soft and persuasive, "you will kill a human being, a tiny child will do."

A tense silence followed, during which the three girls regarded one another with furtive, stealthy looks.

"Well," the "figure" asked eagerly, "will you? A necklace second to none in value, mind."

Mary, who, as usual, was the first to recover her equanimity, looked thoughtfully at the jewels she wore, and lovingly at the rings on her fingers. "Yes," she replied, quite briskly, "I will."

Exactly a month later, a baby on the Island mysteriously disappeared, but as it hadn't been wanted, no fuss was made, and Alisa, Elsa, and Mary each received a magnificent diamond necklace. Some weeks later, a little cripple boy also vanished, but as he was the stepson of a woman who had plainly shown she didn't care what became of him, and no one in the Island had ever taken the slightest interest in him, no enquiries were set on foot. For this murder the three girls got stomachers (such articles being then in vogue) thickly embroidered with precious stones.

Fine feathers attract fine birds, and when it became known that the three sisters possessed jewellery of great value, and how beautiful they looked when wearing it, young men from all over Skye and the neighbouring isles flocked to see them. The Mackies,

however, had nothing but scorn for the poor islanders. They aimed at much higher game.

"You are too presumptuous. An Earl with a big castle will be my accepted suitor, certainly no one of less note," Elsa said one day to a humble admirer who was about to propose to her, and she showed her white teeth in a disdainful smile.

"And we shall marry equally well," Alisa and Mary, who had overheard the conversation, chimed in. "The men we marry will be rich and really great, not like you."

The sisters, now believing that the "figure" was almighty, told it that they wished to marry wealth and position, and it promised them the husbands they desired if they would go one better than heretofore and throw some adult victim into the lake.

No longer even hesitating, the sisters agreed to the condition, and approaching a humpbacked old man no one liked, living near Scavaig, they enticed him without any difficulty to the lake, and having plied him well with whiskey first, easily disposed of him.

A few days later, a ship ran ashore on the Island, and among those rescued were three men, who were extremely wealthy and well born, albeit foreign. The Mackie girls, upon learning this, for reasons known to themselves, showed these shipwrecked foreigners hospitality, and in the end married them. At first they were keen on going abroad to live there with their husbands, who were naturally wishing to go back to their own respective countries; but when it came to actually leaving Skye, they found they could not, owing to the tremendous fascination "dread" Coruisk had for them. Their refusals, then, to leave the Island led to disputes with their husbands, and these disputes speedily grew into quarrels.

Well, to cut a long story short, the sisters in the end hated their husbands and consulted the "figure" as to the best means of getting rid of them. The "figure," as usual, was equal to the occasion. First of all, it told them they must get their husbands to make wills leaving all their possessions to them. Then, after a time, they might entice them to the lake and throw or push them in. And for this triple murder it promised them new husbands belonging to the Scottish nobility, and more jewellery and money. The sisters were by this time so inured to killing that the proposal did not shock them in the least, and they proceeded to act on it at once. Pretending to be very sorry that they hadn't been able to fall in with their husbands' wishes they easily won them round, and by dint of petting and caressing induced them to make wills, leaving their fortunes, *in toto*, to their wives.

Later on, the unsuspecting husbands were only too pleased to go with their wives, when asked by them to do so, for a walk to Coruisk, and the rest was simple. Standing with their pretty wives on the shore of the dark, gleaming lake, apparently watching the ghostly effect of the moonbeams on the water, they had walked straight into the trap. At a signal from Mary they were stabbed in the back by their wives, and taken completely unawares, they fell bleeding to the ground. The sisters, in whom the savage instinct was now highly developed, finished them off at their leisure, and they were dragging the bodies to the edge of the lake, prior to throwing them in, when, upon hearing a harsh chuckle, which they fancied they recognized, they looked up and saw old Mother Macpherson, the witch woman.

"Ha, ha, ha," she laughed, "you three pretty



Yere Campbell

DREAD CORUIK

wenches have progressed a little since I saw you last. Supposing I tell your neighbours what I've seen, what then, my beauties ? ”

“ You won't,” Mary said coolly, “ because we will take measures to prevent you.”

They then all three seized the hag and plunged their poniards, still reeking with the blood of their husbands, in her body. It was then, just before she breathed her last, that she uttered the curse tradition has handed down to us.

“ Fools,” she cried, “ in killing me you have killed the only person who might have helped you in time of need. Instead of helping, I now curse you. Listen to your doom. All will go well with you for a little while longer, and then you will meet with the same fate as I and your other victims. But that is not all. You will never leave these shores, but will ever haunt them in company with the Evil One, who, even now, has you firmly in his keeping.”

She tried to spit at them, but Elsa, perceiving her intention, bent over her and stabbed her to the heart, whilst, immediately afterwards, aided by Mary and Alisa, she hurled her body into “ dread ” Coruisk.

The working of the curse will be seen thus :

Shortly after this quadruple murder, three handsome strangers came to Skye, and when it leaked out that they were Scottish noblemen, the sisters invited them at once to their respective homes.

As they had anticipated, the three men fell in love with them, and everything was going on exactly as they wished, till, one day, an event brought about by their own insatiable greed and lust of blood, turned the tide of their affairs and they received a rude awakening.

Desirous of getting more riches, they chose as their

next victim a poor old man whom they occasionally employed. Unluckily for them, however, this old man had a nephew, who, suspecting them, followed them to the lake, and on their attacking his uncle, went to his assistance. With his fists alone this young man not only succeeded in countering the girls' attack, but he so far subdued and cowed them that he was able to take them to the nearest village.¹ In those days there were apparently no fixed laws on the Island of Skye, and the islanders, now convinced that the three girls were responsible for the series of mysterious disappearances that had been so long going on, decided to execute summary justice on them. Consequently, they took them to Coruisk, the scene of their last outrage, and hurled them, one after another, into the dread waters of the lake.

Alisa, it is said, confessed, but Elsa and Mary died unrepentant. According to tradition, it was immediately after the fulfilment of the curse, that is to say, immediately after the three sisters had been thrown into the lake, that the hauntings of Coruisk began. It was said that people passing by the lake not only at night but even in the day time heard wailings, sighings, and groanings coming from the depths of the still waters, and saw spirit lights floating on its surface. It was also said that the phantoms of lovely girls, on dark, misty nights, tried to lure young men over the precipices that surrounded Coruisk, and that certain of the rocks on its shores sometimes assumed fearful and diabolical shapes. Indeed, the lake got such a reputation that none but the very boldest would ever venture near it alone. Thus it was in those days, and is perhaps even to this day, for I am told that Coruisk is still shunned by many

¹ Presumably the sisters felt that their time had come.

on account of strange happenings that are alleged to occur there periodically.

I heard of one such happening a few years ago. A young Welsh tourist named Morgan, who was visiting Skye, walked one afternoon over to Coruisk. The weather was beautiful, a glorious blue sky overhead, and the sun warm but not unpleasantly hot. Morgan had his dog, a collie, with him, and he was tempting it to go into the water, when it suddenly gave a deep growl, and, on turning round, he beheld quite the prettiest girl he had ever seen, standing close beside him. She was clad in a green dress, cut in the latest fashion, flesh coloured, open worked stockings, and long-pointed patent leather shoes, and as she wore no hat he perceived that her hair, which was of a rich gold colour, was beautifully bobbed and waved in a style that seemed to enhance the charm of her features, that is to say, her long blue eyes, straight nose, rosy mouth, and daintily modelled chin. The gold slave ear-rings she wore also became her to perfection, and not one but many gold slave bangles encircled each arm. Her hands, too, were the acme of loveliness, white and slim, with tapering fingers, crowned with long filbert nails, beautifully manicured. Morgan, who was a great admirer of pretty girls, took in all these details, and his heart gave a violent thump. He looked at her as if he wanted to fall at her feet and worship her right away. She smiled at him. The ice was broken. They spoke, A few minutes later and they were seated together on a rock chatting.

"Where do you live?" he asked her, after a brief pause.

"Close to here," she replied smiling. "I belong to these parts."

"And your name?" Morgan asked again.

"Mary," the girl laughed. "A bit old fashioned, isn't it! What is yours, and what is the matter with your dog, it seems afraid of me?"

Morgan looked at the collie. It was lying some distance away, baring its teeth, growling, and, apparently, shivering all over.

He had never seen it behave in this way before.

"Come here," he cried, but the animal did not move, and when he got up somewhat angrily and tried to make it come, to be introduced to Mary, it ran whining and whimpering away. "That's queer," he ejaculated, "he must be ill," and he sat down again, still looking adoringly at Mary. And so they sat on till the sun began to set, and he was obliged to tear himself away. "I must see you again," he said, as they were parting.

"Well, you can," Mary replied. "Meet me here at midnight, to-morrow."

"Midnight," he repeated, looking at her curiously. "That's a queer time, isn't it?" He was going to add, "for a lady," but checked himself.

"Not with us islanders," she said laughing. "We are absolutely unconventional, and wander about here at all hours of the night,"

"Very well, then," he said. "I will be here to-morrow, at midnight. Au revoir," and they shook hands and parted, he to return to the inn, where he was staying, and she strolling off in the opposite direction.

When he got back, he described "Mary" to the landlord, and asked him who she was.

"I don't know," the landlord said slowly, "but, if I were you, sir, I wouldn't go, alone, to that lake after sunset."

"Why not?" Morgan exclaimed.

"Well, sir," the landlord said, shaking his head and at the same time sinking his voice, so that the people near by shouldn't hear him, "it has a very ill reputation. The people about here say it is cursed."

"Cursed!" Morgan ejaculated, with a loud laugh. "You surely don't believe in such things as cursed places and ghosts! Besides, the young lady I met was absolutely material. Why, her hair was bobbed!"

"Maybe," the landlord retorted. "Still, if I were you, sir, I wouldn't go there again."

Morgan, however, did go there again. Tremendously smitten with the girl, he stole furtively out of the inn and got to Coruisk exactly at midnight. She was not there, no one was there, and as he stood on the deserted shore and glanced at the great fantastic boulders with which it was strewn, at the stern mountains frowning down at him from their heights, at the silent water, lit up in places by the white light from the half-hidden moon, and at the strange waving shadows at his feet, he felt distinctly uncomfortable. All was hushed, silent as the proverbial grave, and the feeling of dread that had come over him was momentarily increasing, when he espied in the darkness ahead of him a gruesome-looking blue flame, like the flame of a big candle. It moved, and passing slowly over the surface of the lake, finally halted in front of a rock, close to where he stood. Wondering what it could be, in spite of his scepticism regarding the supernatural, and not a little awed, he gazed at the rock, and to his astonishment perceived it bore a striking resemblance to a face, albeit a very grotesque and alarming one. There was the nose, long and hooked, the chin prominent and pointed, the ears

protruding and prick-shaped, and the eyes large and hollow.

And as he stared in fascination at the phenomenon, the eyes suddenly glowed with a pale, baleful light, and he was acutely conscious of some queer, evil presence looking malevolently at him. At that moment a girlish laugh he seemed to recognize rang mockingly out on the still and silent air, and with its echoes still in his ears he fell to the ground in a faint.

When he recovered consciousness he found his landlord and one of the servants of the inn bending over him. It transpired that the landlord had seen him leave the inn, and guessing that he was going to Coruisk, and being apprehensive owing to the many gruesome tales he had heard concerning the lake, had followed him.

"It was a good thing we turned up when we did," the landlord remarked to Morgan as they walked back together, "for had you lain there much longer, ill might have befallen you. I saw the bairn you spoke to me about, and she vanished like a trail of smoke in fine air as we came up to you, and there is no doubt at all that she was the spirit of Mary Mackie come to lure you to destruction. Take my advice, sir, and never go near Coruisk at night again, alone. It is both ghost-ridden and accursed."

CHAPTER IX

COWDRAY HOUSE AND BATTLE ABBEY

THE ivy-clad ruins of Cowdray House are situated in some fields close to Midhurst, in Sussex.

In order to trace the story attached to them, one must look back to the reign of Henry III, when one John Bohun, Baron Midhurst, who lived at Midhurst, for some poignant reason, perhaps to show remorse for some sin or folly committed in his youth, history can point to many such instances, founded the Benedictine Nunnery of Easebourn, or Esseburn.

The size of this nunnery may be gauged from the fact that it was intended for the use of only five nuns, and, of course, a prioress. It is curious to note the names of some of the prioresses, such, for instance, as Agnes Tawke, who became prioress in 1472 ; Joan Sackfylde, her successor, and Elizabeth and Margaret Sackville, probably sisters, who were prioresses in the years 1534 and 1535 respectively. The last named was prioress when Henry VIII, in 1537, seized the nunnery and all the demesnes attached to it and gave them to Sir William Fitz William, whom he created Earl of Southampton. The question of the curse now arises. According to Sir Henry Spelman,¹ all the old religious houses were protected by curses, that is to say, at the time of their founding a curse was laid on any layman who should ever dare to

¹ Vide *The History and Fate of Sacrilege*.

interfere, in any way, with them. If Sir Henry Spelman be right then, for our own part we do not doubt it, the moment the Earl of Southampton took possession of Easebourn Nunnery he placed himself under the ban of a curse; and consequently that any one of its inmates of the nunnery should have cursed him, it being so obviously unnecessary and superfluous to do so, would seem to us somewhat unlikely.

However, tradition¹ asserts that the Prioress Margaret Sackville, on surrendering the nunnery to the Earl of Southampton, cursed both him and his descendants; and some colour is certainly lent to this rumour by the fact that the Earl died in 1542 and left no issue. The nunnery and the demesnes attached to it now passed into the hands of Sir Anthony Browne, the Earl's stepbrother. The Earl's mother, who was the fourth daughter and co-heiress of John Neville, Marquis of Montague, had married twice, her second husband being Sir Anthony Browne, Knight, and it was their eldest son who came into possession of the nunnery and lands of Easebourn. This Sir Anthony Browne, apparently not satisfied with the extent of his property, added the Battle Abbey estate to it, which, on the Dissolution of the Monasteries, had been given to a person named Gilmer.² And now, according to tradition, comes another curse.

Gilmer, apparently, had not interfered with Battle Abbey itself, but had merely pulled down some of the cottages on the estate. Consequently, at the time he sold the property to Sir Anthony Browne, the monks were still in possession of their home. Being

¹ I can find no actual record of this.

² Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 108.

anxious to convert the Abbey into a private dwelling place for himself, Sir Anthony determined to evict them at once. Their protests were in vain. He was inexorable, and, accompanied by armed followers, he went to the Abbey, and standing in the grounds, opposite the main entrance, he watched the hapless brothers make a hurried departure. With backs bent, owing to the weight of their belongings which they carried with them, they filed out of the building, one after another, Sir Anthony smiling sardonically as they staggered past him. The Abbey, thus cleared of its monastic occupants, underwent many alterations, and when, at last, his residential quarters were ready, and Sir Anthony took up his abode therein, he gave a banquet to celebrate the event. It was a magnificent affair, no expense was spared, and the guests included all the richest and most influential people in the neighbourhood.

In the midst of it, however, when the mirth and jollity were at their height, a tall, stern-visaged monk suddenly entered the great hall, and striding up to the dais on which Sir Anthony and his guests were seated, demanded silence.

His appearance was so arrestive, and there was something so authoritative in his voice and manner, that there was an instant lull in the conversation, which was soon followed by complete silence.

Fixing his eyes on Sir Anthony, the monk then spoke.

"Heaven's curse on thee, Sir Anthony," he said,¹ "for the sacrilege and for the cruel wrong thou hast done the rightful occupants of this building. Thy peace shalt be but short-lived, for ere many years have flown, thou shalt lose what thou dost prize the

¹ Or words to this effect.

most. More than that, fire and water shall one day bring about the total extinction of thy race." He said no more, but turning round solemnly took his departure, none daring to speak till he was out of sight.

The incident had a most disquieting and depressing effect on all who witnessed it, and although Sir Anthony, pretending that he was not affected by it, tried to laugh it off and revive the fun that had so suddenly ceased, his efforts were in vain, and the party soon came to a miserable end.

For some days afterwards Sir Anthony appears to have been very despondent, but he quickly recovered, and, moreover, incurred the liability of yet another curse by building a magnificent mansion for himself on the Church land close to the nunnery of Easebourn. This mansion he called Cowdray House, and here he entertained Queen Elizabeth who, later, chiefly, perhaps, in consideration of his lavish hospitality, for he had entertained her in truly regal style, created him Baron and Viscount Montague. This social triumph, however, was barely achieved when his happiness, which then seemed almost complete, received a terrible set-back in the death of his only son, to whom he was wholly devoted. Believers in the supernatural saw in this calamity, of course, the working out of the Monk's curse, and fully expected that other misfortunes would speedily befall Viscount Montague. But in this they were mistaken; the rest of the Viscount's life passed uneventfully enough, and, in due course, he was succeeded by his grandson, who inherited his title and estates. Battle Abbey having been sold to the Webster family (by the first Viscount Montague) soon after the Monk's curse, Cowdray House was now the Montague's principal

seat, and for the next two hundred years they lived there happily enough, the curses associated with the place being, apparently, powerless to act.

It was not until 1793 that an event occurred which gave rise to the belief that these curses were still exerting their strange influence, in other words, still taking effect. The momentous event was this :

Viscount Montague, who succeeded to the title and estates of Cowdray on the death of his father, in 1787, went in the spring of 1793 for a walking tour in Germany, accompanied by his friend, Mr. Sedley Burdett, a younger brother of Sir Francis Burdett.

Both were very fond of boating, and on arriving at the Rhine, they decided to try and shoot the rapids of Laufenburg,¹ near the celebrated falls of Schaffausen.

The authorities in the nearest town, hearing of their intention, tried to dissuade them, pointing out that the rapids were most dangerous, and that to attempt any such scheme as they contemplated was little short of suicide. The young men, however, would not listen to advice, and on the morning chosen for the enterprise they set out to the falls, two hours earlier than they had publicly arranged to do, in order to elude the authorities, whom they feared might try and stop them. The boat they had ordered previously was awaiting them, some little distance above the falls, and they stepped into it, laughing and talking and, apparently, confident of success.

Thanks to luck, perhaps, more than to any very skilful oarsmanship, they shot the first and upper fall without mishap, and were in the act of shooting

¹ Vide *History and Fate of Sacrilege*.

the second and lower rapids, when, to the horror and dismay of those who stood on the shore watching them, they suddenly disappeared from view, and were never seen again. It was supposed their boat struck a submerged rock, and being badly damaged sank into a hole or cleft where it remained.

This catastrophe was quickly followed by another :

Before its owner had been dead a week, Cowdray House caught fire—no one could say how—and was totally destroyed.¹ As Viscount Montague left no issue, his fortune and estates passed by will to his only sister, Elizabeth Mary, wife of Mr. W. S. Poynz, a rich Buckinghamshire squire, while the title passed to another branch of the family and soon became extinct. But the Monk's curse was not yet fulfilled. More catastrophes followed.

Mr. Poynz had two sons, and on the morning of July 7, 1815, while staying at Bognor, he took them out boating. He was an excellent swimmer himself, but neither of the boys could swim a stroke. No one, apparently, knew exactly how the accident happened, but the boat was seen from the shore to capsize suddenly, plunging all three occupants into the water. Both boys clung to their father, thus rendering him helpless, and he was obliged to shake them off, otherwise all three would have been drowned. The boys then sank to the bottom, and though Mr. Poynz dived again and again in his attempts to rescue them, he failed.

As soon as this calamity became known, the Monk's curse, i.e. "Fire and water shall bring about the extinction of thy race," was recalled, and the deaths of these two boys, which so materially helped to

¹ The ruins of it are yet to be seen. No attempt was ever made to rebuild it.

bring about the extinction of their race, was generally believed to be entirely due to it.

In connection with this affair, all sorts of unkind and untrue things were said about Mr. Poynz. For instance, some years later, when, during an electioneering campaign, he was addressing a large audience as candidate (whether Liberal or Conservative, I cannot say) for Midhurst, a rough-looking man suddenly shouted, in a voice that could be heard by everyone present: "Who shook his sons off, when he fancied himself drowning?" Mr. Poynz, it is said, on this occasion fainted. His three daughters, Frances, Elizabeth, and Isabella, married, respectively, Lord Clinton, Earl Spencer, and the Marquis of Exeter. On coming into their father's estates, at his death, they sold them *in toto* to Lord Egremont, the property that had entailed so much unhappiness to the Montagues thus passing for ever out of their hands.

With the advent of strangers, innocent of sacrilege—at least, as far as their newly acquired property was concerned—the curses seem to have departed. At all events, for aught I can discover to the contrary, all has been normal on the Cowdray estate ever since.

CHAPTER X

THE PHANTOM HORSEMAN OF WYCOLLER

THE ruins of Wycoller Hall occupy a picturesque position at one end of the little village of Wycoller, near Colne, in Lancashire.

Owing to the fact that so little of the building remains, it is somewhat difficult to map out, with any degree of correctness, the plan of its original construction, but, broadly speaking, like most sixteenth-century houses of any size, it consisted of a central hall and two wings.

The hall, which would seem to have been very large, contained a gigantic fireplace,¹ having within its semicircular recess a stone seat, upon which eighteen people, at least, could be comfortably accommodated. Many large and beautiful mullioned windows formed another interesting feature of this central hall, and they were, one imagines, a necessity, rather than a luxury, as the house, for many years, was surrounded by a dense wood. It would seem to have belonged at first to a Mr. Piers Hartley, who sold it about the middle of the sixteenth century to Nicholas Cunliffe, of Hollins, one of that family of Cunliffes who originally came from Cundecliffe,² near Billington, and who were, as their name implies, perhaps, large and highly esteemed landowners. Nicholas had three sons, Ellis, Robert, and Charles, and the Cunliffe, around whom the tradition of the

¹ Still to be seen.

² Still in existence.

Phantom Horseman of Wycoller Hall centres, was, undoubtedly, descended from one of them. From which one of them we are not told, and have no means of ascertaining, but this matters little; the fact that he was a Cunliffe remains, and the tragedy for which he was responsible is said to have occurred some time during the reign of James I.

Now, families, however eminent and respectable, have their black sheep, and the Cunliffes of Wycoller, Billington, had a very black sheep in that member of their family to whom I have just alluded as the figure around which the tradition I am about to narrate centres. He was bad with a badness that stood out conspicuously even in the abandoned and dissolute times in which he lived, and he was known far and wide as "Wild" Cunliffe.

Good looking in a dark and somewhat sinister style that was peculiar to the Cunliffes, he had an extraordinary fascination for women, which, no doubt, accounts for his marrying, at a very early age, one of the prettiest girls in that part of Lancashire. For a time they seem to have lived fairly happily together, but his craving for change and excitement caused him to relapse into his former evil ways, and it was not long before he began to drink and gamble more recklessly than ever. Remonstrances from his gentle long-suffering wife proved of no avail, and he only met her tears and entreaties with oaths and not infrequently with blows. And then came the crisis. One night, mad with drink and infuriated with his losses at cards and dice, he became obsessed with the idea that his wife was responsible for his ill luck. Vowing vengeance against her, in consequence, he mounted his horse and riding furiously back to Wycoller, he entered the house, and bounding up the

broad oak staircase, two or three steps at a time, burst into the bedroom, poniard in hand. A frightful scene then ensued.

It was in vain she threw herself on her knees before him, asserting her innocence. He was blind to reason, and it was in vain she implored him to spare her, he was pitiless. Seizing her by the throat with one hand, he stabbed her repeatedly with the other, none of the other inmates of the house daring to intervene. Falling almost lifeless to the ground in a welter of blood, she had just sufficient strength left to raise herself on her elbow and pronounce the curse she attributed to the will of heaven on her husband.

Tradition does not record the exact words of the curse, but, presumably, what she said was to this effect :

“Wretched man, for your many vices and sins, for your blasphemy, and, above all, for your crime in killing me, your wife, who has loved you devotedly and never done you any injury, Heaven has cursed you. I know it, I feel it. Shunned and despised by all your present friends and associates, you will die alone, and in utter misery. Moreover, you will not rest in peace. On every anniversary of this, your worst act, you will visit this house and in this room re-enact, in detail, all you have just done, and you will continue to do this until Heaven wills that you desist.

And more than this. Your descendants will gradually lose their land, until, in the end, nothing shall remain to them, not even this hall, which will eventually fall in ruins and continue in that state for many years, as a daily and visible memento of your crime.” She made an effort to say more, but failed, and her strength, now utterly exhausted, she sank back on to the floor and expired.



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Concerning the subsequent fate of "Wild" Cunliffe, tradition is curiously silent. We are not told whether the law punished him for his crime or not ; we can only infer that, as the curse is stated to have worked out in full, he died miserably, shunned and hated by all his former companions and acquaintances, who, abandoned though they may have been and most probably were, apparently drew the line at butchering a defenceless woman. He, apparently, left progeny, presumably the children of his victim, for the tradition avers that the Cunliffes of Wycoller remained fairly prosperous till the Great Civil War, when their loyalty to the King cost them dear, and they lost all their property except Wycoller Hall. This remained in the Cunliffe family, in direct line, till 1773, when, on Henry Cunliffe's death, it passed to his great nephew, Henry Owen, the son of Sarah Owen, *née* Scarsgill, whose mother, before her marriage to John Scarsgill, was Elizabeth Cunliffe. This Henry Owen, on his accession to the property, took the name of Cunliffe and lived in Wycoller Hall till his death, which occurred in 1819 ; but he, dying childless, was positively the last of the Cunliffes, and the estate, being bought by mortgage under a decree of Chancery, passed thus into the hands of strangers.

The Hall, however, was never tenanted again. Some declared that no one cared to live there, on account of the haunting ; but, however that may be, it stood empty and, consequently, fell into a state of decay and demolition, which gradually grew worse and worse, until, as has already been stated, only the barest remnants of the house are now left.

With regard to the haunting, which is alleged to have begun directly after "Wild" Cunliffe's death, it is stated that his, the murderer's, spirit, on every

anniversary of the murder he committed, visits the scene of his crime and there re-enacts it in exact fulfilment of the curse.¹

Mounted on a phantom horse, he may be seen, it is said, to approach the old hall at a break-neck speed, and having arrived at the main entrance, to dismount and enter. "He is attired in the costume of the Early Stuart period, and the trappings of his horse are of the most uncouth description. On the evening of his visit the weather is always wild and tempestuous. There is no moon to light the lonely roads, and the residents of the district do not venture out of their cottages. When the wind howls the loudest the horseman can be heard dashing up the road at full speed. And after crossing the narrow bridge,² he suddenly stops at the door of the hall (i.e. the ruins).

The rider then dismounts and makes his way up the broak oaken stairs into one of the rooms of the house. Dreadful screams, as from a woman, are then heard, which soon subside into groans. The horseman then makes his appearance at the door, at once mounts his steed, and gallops off along the road he came. His body can be seen through by those who may chance to be present; his horse appears to be wild with rage, and his nostrils stream with fire."

So says tradition, and though many people living in the neighbourhood of Wycoller scoff at "the Phantom Rider," there are others who not only profess their belief in the reputed phenomenon, but even assert that they have seen it.

Of the stories told by these eye-witnesses, the following is an example :

¹ Vide *Lancashire Legends*, by Messrs. Hailand & Wilkinson.

² Apparently the bridge over the stream near the hall.

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Some years ago, Mr. Lebrun, a Channel Islander, on a walking tour in the North of England, was overtaken one evening by a storm, when in the vicinity of Wycoller village. Forced to take shelter under a hedge, he stood or rather crouched there, listening to the heavy pattering of the raindrops and the periodical moaning and howling of the wind. Suddenly, distinct above the roaring of the elements, came the sound of a horse's hoofs. There was something curious about them, something that puzzled the listener, something he could not define.

As they drew nearer, the rain abruptly ceased, and the moon, which had hitherto been hidden behind the storm clouds, shone forth, flooding the road and fields on either side of it with a cold white glow.

Lebrun was about to continue his walk, and was stamping on the ground to restore his circulation, when the sound of the hoofs got close to, and the next moment a man on a big black horse dashed past him in the direction of Wycoller. He was gone so quickly, however, that he, Lebrun, had not time to catch even a glimpse of his face. He only noticed, much to his surprise, that the horseman was clad in the Cavalier costume of the time of Charles I, namely, a very wide brimmed hat, with a plume in it, high boots, and a long voluminous cloak; and that the horse's accoutrements also appeared to belong to a very ancient and picturesque period.

Indeed, Lebrun was so amazed at the strange appearance of the horse and horseman, and the latter's furious riding, that he commented on what he had seen to someone in the neighbourhood, and this person, knowing the story of the Phantom Horseman of Wycoller Hall, was immensely interested. He naturally alluded to the tradition, and was all the

more interested and surprised when he learned that Lebrun had never heard either of the curse or the haunting until then.

“Why, you were sure to see Wild Cunliffe last night,” he exclaimed, “for it was the one night in the year upon which he is to be seen, and the weather conditions were favourable to his appearance.”

Now, I do not vouch for the veracity of this story. I can only say that the narrator of it appeared to me to be perfectly sincere. Should it be true, it would seem that Wild Cunliffe had not then appeased the wrath of Heaven and, for ought one knows, the curse is still in operation.

CHAPTER XI

THE WILD GORDONS OF GIGHT

OF the Scottish Gordons there are many separate and distinct clans, and although the origin of some of these clans may be easily traced, the origin of others is very obscure. The Gordons of Earlston,¹ in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, are descended from Alexander Gordon, second son of the 6th Lord of Lochmar. He adopted the doctrines of Wycliffe and used to propound them, clandestinely, to his followers in the woods of Aire. His son William, following in his father's footsteps, espoused the cause of the Covenanters and was cut to pieces by some English soldiers when trying to join the Covenanters' Army at Bothwell Bridge; and his eldest son, Alexander, also a Covenanter, was seized by the troops of Charles II, and after being immured in dungeons in Edinburgh Castle and on the Bass Rock, was taken to Blackness Castle, where he remained in "durance vile" till William of Orange ascended the English throne and gave him back his freedom and his estates. Since then no incident relating to this clan of sufficient interest to warrant record seems to have happened.

The Gordons of Pitlurg, in Aberdeenshire, claim descent from John de Gordon, to whom, in 1376, Robert II awarded Strabolgie.

Other Gordon clans are the Gordons of Abergeldie,

¹ Vide *Great Historic Families of Scotland*, by James Taylor.

Wardhouse, Fyvie, Gordonstown, Letterfourie, Embo, and Gight,¹ the last named being associated with the famous curse, the history of which I am about to narrate. The Gordons of Gight, who are now extinct, originated² in the 2nd Earl of Huntley and his wife, the Princess Jane, daughter of James II of Scotland. Their male descendants, in every generation it would seem, were wild and dissolute, and worse than that, since they constantly committed murderous outrages that were deemed brutal and unwarrantable even in those abandoned and lawless times. Here is an instance :

One cold wintry day in September 1601, a horseman came riding furiously to the Castle of Gight, with a letter for the Laird.

“Take that,” he said to the surly-looking porter who answered his summons at the outer gates, “and deliver it to your master at once. It is from Edinburgh.”

The porter said nothing, but taking the missive slouched off with it.

“What the hell’s this,” the Laird roared, snatching the letter, and then, as he glanced through it: “From the Government at Edinburgh summoning me to answer for my conduct in destroying the crops of certain persons against whom I have conceived mortal wrath and wounding them to the imminent peril of their lives. I wish to God I had slain the lot, the damned thieving, back-biting sons of Satan. See ye here, Kenneth, go tell the man who gave ye this letter that the Laird of Gight will do all that is required of him and more. And then send Malcolm to me at once.”

¹ This list is not comprehensive.

² Presumably the second Earl of Huntley adopted the name of Gordon.

Off slunk the porter, chuckling evilly to himself and gave the message to the horseman, who, turning round, rode off in the direction he had come, "lippening for nae harm or pursuit." He had reached a wood, and was wending his way very slowly and with difficulty along a narrow and very rough bridle path, when a number of ferocious looking ruffians, clad in the tartan of the Gordons of Gight, suddenly emerged from the bushes, and seizing the horse by the bridle dragged the unfortunate messenger from the saddle. Realizing that escape was impossible, he suffered himself to be taken back to Gight Castle and conducted into the presence of the Laird.

A more forbidding, sinister face the messenger had never seen, and the moment he set eyes on it he gave himself up for lost. Nor were his fears unfounded, for the Laird, upon seeing him, uttered a terrible imprecation, and picking up a loaded pistol from the table by his side, would have shot him through the head had not one of his principal retainers brushed the weapon aside and begged him to remember the honour of the Gordons, and to desist for that honour's sake. The messenger's life was thus saved, but he was not allowed to depart. He was dragged from the great hall, in which the foregoing scene had taken place, into an inner apartment, and there searched. Several letters being found in his pockets, they were torn up and put in a bowl of steaming broth. He was then told to consume the broth, letters and all, and one of his captors stood by his side prodding him with the point of a dagger till he obeyed. After that he was driven out of the castle with blows and kicks, and told that he might go back whence he came.

However senseless and cruel as his conduct was on this occasion, the Laird of Gight far surpassed it

fourteen years later. Francis Haig, Cousin-german to the Earl of Errol, having killed Adam Gordon, the Laird of Gight's brother, in a duel, the Laird forthwith resolved to take summary vengeance on him.

He was accordingly pounced upon one day by a party of Gordons, when he was out alone and far enough away from any of his followers, and taken in secret to Aberdeen. There he was subjected to a mock trial before the Laird of Gight and condemned to die the following morning. When the hour fixed for his execution arrived, he was taken by a number of the Laird's well-armed retainers to a lonely spot near a wood, and there, being unarmed and consequently unable to defend himself, he was hacked to pieces.

Directly the news of this outrage leaked out, Francis Haig's relatives and friends demanded that the Laird of Gight should be brought to book ; but the Government, fearing that any attempt to punish him would result in the whole of the Gordon clan being up in arms, did nothing, and the murderer, thus confirmed in his wickedness by the Government's cowardice, went on his way rejoicing.

The next Gordon of Gight conspicuous for his defiance of the law was George, Laird of Gight. In 1661 he was threatened by the Presbytery of Aberdeen¹ with excommunication and deportation, unless he abandoned the Roman Catholic faith and became a Covenanter. Unlike the Gordons of Earlston, who, as already stated, turned Covenanters, the Gordons of Gight always remained true to the faith of their fathers, and no matter how reckless or evil the lives they had led, they invariably died loyal and penitent Catholics.

¹ Vide *Great Historic Families of Scotland*.

George Gordon was typical in this respect. In answer to the demands of the Presbytery of Aberdeen, he declared that he was unable to leave Scotland owing to sickness, but offered to confine himself to within a radius of one mile of Gight Castle.

"If it shall please His Majesty and you Elders of the Kirk of Scotland," he concluded, "to take my blude for my profession which is Roman Catholic, I will maist willingly offer it; and if sae be, God grant me constancy to abide the same." This reply was not, however, deemed satisfactory by the Presbytery of Aberdeen, who, in response, informed him that unless he should within eight days either turn Covenanter or leave Scotland, he would be excommunicated.¹ George Gordon's reply to this was characteristic of himself and his clan.

A few days after his receipt of the mandate of the Presbytery of Aberdeen, the inhabitants of the sleepy little Covenanter town of Banff were considerably startled by the sudden appearance, in their midst, of a number of horsemen, all armed to the teeth and clad in the Gordon of Gight's tartan. Shouting the slogan of the Gordons, and brandishing their bared claymores ferociously, the horsemen dashed along the main street of Banff to the little town hall. Here they dismounted and marching into the building, seized several bailies, who were hiding under the tables and in cupboards, and forced them—threatening to cut their throats if they refused—to declare their renunciation of the Covenant in writing. Having accomplished this part of their programme, and, to the extreme amusement and satisfaction of many of the onlookers, very soundly cuffed and kicked the

¹ Vide *Selections from the Ecclesiastical Records of Aberdeen*, XXXVI, etc.

apostate bailies, the Gordons robbed the building of all the buff coats, picks, swords, and other weapons they could find, and then compelled the unfortunate bailies to provide them with food and wait on them. A regular orgie followed, in which all the wilder spirits of the town took part, and it was not until long after the dawn had broken that the party at length broke up, and the reckless, devil-may-care Gordons took their departure.

It is on record that not only George Gordon himself participated in this affair, but his friends and comrades in arms, the Lairds of Newton and Ardlogie. After this the Presbytery of Aberdeen thought it best to refrain from trying to enforce their mandate, and consequently, for the rest of his life the young Laird of Gight was allowed to remain an adherent to the faith of his ancestors, without interference.

In some, if not in all, of the foregoing incidents, which I have quoted to show what manner of men the Gordons of Gight were, may be found, perhaps, some justification for the famous curse alleged to have been pronounced on them by that champion curser, Thomas the Rhymer.¹ Anyhow, tradition asserts that the Gordons' wild and abandoned behaviour so scandalized Thomas, that no curse that he had hitherto thought of seemed to him to provide an adequate punishment in their case, and he lay awake whole nights trying to think of a curse that he could, with some sense of fitness, pronounce on them.

We do not know (tradition is silent on this point) how he delivered his famous anathema: whether he visited the Laird of Gight in his stronghold and cursed him to his face, or whether, knowing the

¹ Known also as Thomas of Learmount and Thomas of Ercildoune.

Laird's reputation,¹ he thought it wiser to transmit what he wished to say to him through a third person and in writing; we are merely told that he called down the wrath of Heaven on the Laird's head, saying that it was God's desire that he should know no more happiness, but should die tortured to death by his own conscience, and concluded the curse with these prophetic lines :

“ When the heron leaves the tree
The Laird of Gight shall landless be.
At Gight three men by sudden death shall dee,
And after that the land shall lie in lea.”

Had anyone else uttered the prophecy contained in these lines, little notice would, probably, have been taken of it; but Thomas the Rhymer, having so great a reputation as a prophet, the fortunes of the Gordons of Gight were followed by all with the keenest interest, special observation being kept on a heronry amid the trees that surrounded the castle.

Every day someone or another would peep at one of the trees in particular, that tree being a favourite haunt of the birds, to see if any one of them was perched on its branches, and if none were there the whisper would go round: “Tammass's rhyme is coming true, the herons have all gone away.”

The rumour, however, always proved premature, the birds invariably returning sooner or later, till at last people grew weary of looking at the tree, and Thomas and his prophecy became wellnigh forgotten.

Such was the state of affairs in 1785, when considerable interest was aroused in the neighbourhood of Gight by the marriage of Katherine, the last of the Gordons of Gight, and as wild and devil-may-care as any of them, albeit beautiful, as so many of the

¹ This would be about the middle of the sixteenth century.

Gordon women were, to Captain John Byron, a gambler and spendthrift.¹

It was then the long anticipated at last happened. Some of the servants at the castle, going into the grounds one morning, found the heronry deserted. They then remembered the words of the old prophecy, and, like their predecessors of many generations back, they at once cried out : " Tammas's rhyme is coming true, the herons have all gone away." And this time what they said proved to be correct ; for not a heron returned,² and soon afterwards the estates of Gight passed for ever from the Gordons, the many creditors of Katherine Gordon seizing them and selling them for £18,500 to the Earl of Aberdeen.

However, as yet the prophecy had only been fulfilled in part, and considerable curiosity was now evinced regarding the remainder. Would that, people asked each other, likewise come true ? They who looked for an answer to this question had not long to wait. One morning, in 1791, Lord Haddo was practising a horse on the green close to the castle. The animal appeared to be unusually restive, and when it suddenly shied violently and pitched Lord Haddo over its head, certain of the onlookers received something in the nature of a thrill. They immediately ran to his assistance, and upon finding that he had broken his neck and was dead, they whispered ominously to one another : " Number one of the three men in old Tammas's rhyme ! Who will be the next ? "

The next, apparently, was one of Lord Aberdeen's servants. This man, not long after Lord Haddo's

¹ They became the parents of the famous poet, Lord Byron.

² The herons all went to Kelly. Vide *Great Historic Families of Scotland*.

death, met with a similar death, when practising a horse in a field belonging to a farm on the Gight estate. Everyone now said that the third death would occur almost immediately; but in this they were wrong, for several years passed before the death which they were anticipating happened.

It happened, however, in a strangely significant manner. Some workmen, employed in converting the farm where the second death had occurred into a pasture land or lea, began to discuss Thomas the Rhymer's curse and prophecy.

"I don't think much of it," one of them remarked. "Two have died here by accident, to be sure, but that was years ago, and it ain't likely that a third will."

Now, he had hardly uttered these words, when the wall of the farm under which he was seated suddenly collapsed, killing him on the spot, whilst his companions, who were seated there with him, escaped unhurt. Thus it seemed obvious to all that this catastrophe had been brought about by some controlling and impelling fate, and a few weeks later, when the farmyard and buildings were finally converted into a lea, it was realized by all that the prophecy popularly attributed to Thomas the Rhymer had been fulfilled to the very letter.

CHAPTER XII

CORFE CASTLE AND THE CURSE OF ST. DUNSTAN

FEW castles have obtained a more unenviable reputation than Corfe, which will ever be associated with the infamous and beautiful Elfrida and the assassination, by her order, of her unfortunate stepson, Prince Edward. The ordinary history in recounting this oft-told tragedy leads one to suppose that the murder of Prince Edward was the only murder of which Elfrida was guilty, whereas it is a well known fact that it was merely one of many she committed, and that she was, in very truth, a hardened and bloodthirsty criminal, with a list of atrocities to her credit that has rarely, if ever, been surpassed.

What is known of her history may be briefly described thus :¹

About the year A.D. 960, among the most wealthy and influential of the nobles in the West of England was Orgarius,² Earl of Devon, who, tradition tells us, owing to a wonderful dream that he had, commenced to build Tavistock Abbey, dedicating it to St. Mary. But not only has he come down to posterity as the founder of Tavistock Abbey, he is remembered, likewise, as the father of two very remarkable children : namely, Ordulph, who is said to have been so tall that he could stride across a stream ten feet wide, and Elfrida, a girl of such surpassing beauty

¹ Vide *Picturesque England*, by L. Valentine.

² Also known as Olgar. Vide *Old Castles and Abbeys*.

that all England rang with her praises and knights came from every part of the kingdom to seek her hand in marriage.

Now, it so happened at that time that England possessed in Edgar the Peaceable a very peculiar king. He was surnamed the Peaceable, apparently, for no other reason than that he stood in high favour with Dunstan and the Church, through whose instrumentality he had really acquired the throne. Subsequently, realizing the extraordinary influence Dunstan exercised over all with whom he came in contact, and the ever increasing power of the Church under his leadership, Edgar took every care to keep in with him, and it was thus that he gained the reputation for being priest-ridden, when he was really only a consummate statesman and a very prudent and tactful, not to say cunning, ruler. In return for the many favours he bestowed on Dunstan, and for his liberality to the monks, the Church acquired for him, too, a character for virtue and sobriety which he does not seem to have wholly deserved. To begin with, the manner in which he obtained his first wife was far from exemplary.

Conceiving a violent passion for a beautiful nun named Editha, the daughter of Earl Ordmer, whom he had watched (presumably he was playing the spy) walking in the grounds of a convent, he broke into the convent one night and carried her off by force, an act of sacrilege for which history informs us he was severely reprimanded by the Church and forbidden to wear the crown for seven years, though he could still, apparently, wield the sceptre!

His second marriage, though not brought about in so unlawful a manner, was rendered odious by the circumstances that attended it.

Having heard of the wondrous beauty of Elfrida, a beauty men raved about, he was seized with the desire to see her, and to marry her, if she were anything like as pretty as he had been led to believe. Accordingly, he instructed his chief favourite, Earl Athelwold, to travel down to Devonshire to see Elfrida and, after seeing her, to report to him exactly what she was like.

"If your report is favourable," he added, "and you think she really is all that she is said to be, I shall invite her here and make her my wife. You are, I know, an excellent judge of women's looks, therefore I can rely upon your verdict, and I shall act in this matter entirely upon your recommendation. Now go."

So Athelwold set out on horseback to Devonshire and in due course and after various adventures, common enough in those semi-savage times, arrived at the castle of Orgarius, Earl of Devon. When he saw Elfrida, he was bewildered. Very sceptical regarding her alleged beauty, he had expected to see a comely and rather buxom country maiden, a trifle more refined, of course, than the farmers' daughters and girls in a lower station of life, but still awkward and ungainly, compared with the elegant ladies he had been accustomed to meet at Court and at receptions in and around London.

Her actual appearance, for the moment, took his breath away and staggered him. It is not known for certain whether she was fair or dark, but we may surmise that being, presumably, of Saxon origin, she was fair,¹ with a wealth of curly golden hair, eyes

¹ In contradiction to what she is popularly described, dark people being erroneously considered more prone to deeds of darkness than fair people.

blue as the bluest summer sky, daintily moulded ripe red lips, perfectly even teeth, and hands that would have sent Théophile Gautier, that great connoisseur of hands, into raptures. Probably she wore but little clothing; there would be nothing odd about that in those very remote times, when all garments were hand-made and silk and dyes no easy matter to procure in far off Devon. However, scanty as her garments may have been and most probably were, she wore many jewels, and they, as she knew only too well, added lustre to her beauty and made her appear positively dazzling. Athelwold was so fascinated that he could not remove his gaze from her.

Indeed, after his long ride through the gloomy woods and glens that were at that period a characteristic feature of Devon and Somerset, in Elfrida he seemed to see a fairy, one of those fair, radiant, ethereal beings he had been told haunted the wild and remote districts of the West of England. Deeply infatuated he forgot the purpose of his mission and his loyalty to Edgar; he could only think of Elfrida's marvellous loveliness, and revel in it.

The hours spent in her company sped like minutes, the days like hours, and he was soon, far too soon, aware that it was time for him to set out on his return journey.

The evening before he was to take his departure he accompanied Elfrida for a stroll in the wood adjoining the castle, and under the shadow of its trees he confessed his love, imploring her to marry him. Tradition paints a pretty picture of them standing under the wide spreading branches of a great elm, the knight clasping the lady's hands, whilst gazing ardently into her eyes, and the lady smiling up at him, half shyly

and half archly, her dainty lips opened just sufficiently wide to reveal two rows of milky white teeth, that gleamed in the rays of the fast setting sun. Tall and almost herculean in figure, he is clad in the costume of a soldier of the period, that is to say, in the untanned skin of some wild animal, covered in places with somewhat cumbrous and massive pieces of armour; while she is wearing a white sleeveless robe, the material of which, apparently, is composed of silk or very fine linen. There is no covering or adornment of any sort on her head, and her fair hair, untrammelled, falls in a mass of gleaming golden curls about her neck and shoulders. She has sandals on her feet, but her legs are bare, whilst her ankles, no less than her wrists, are encircled with bangles of pure gold. She is certainly very lovely, and it is small wonder that Athelwold looks adoringly at her, and worships her heart and soul.

She made no verbal response to his declaration of love, but raising her face to his gazed at him from under her long curling eyelashes, in such a manner that the next moment she was in his arms and their lips met in a long and passionate kiss.

Thus it was they plighted their troth. The next day Athelwold very reluctantly said good-bye to Elfrida and set off to London.

On arriving there he immediately presented himself to Edgar, who eagerly asked him what the famous Devonshire beauty was like.

"She's most disappointing, Sire," Athelwold replied. "After all that has been said of her I naturally expected to see someone at least good looking, but she's not even that. She's just a buxom country maiden, comely enough, I admit, compared with most of the girls in those wild, savage parts, but

not to be compared with, shall we say, my cousin Torfrida, or the Earl of Mercia's relative, the Lady Godwina."

"Then your mission has been in vain," ejaculated the King. "How disappointing! Well, it cannot be helped. I must look for a bride elsewhere." And, with a sigh, he turned the conversation into another channel.

A few days later, to Edgar's astonishment, Athelwold came to him, stating that he wished to marry Elfrida, and asking his permission to do so.

"Why, how now, Athelwold," Edgar exclaimed, "I am at a loss to understand you. Is Elfrida fairer after all than you thought fit to tell me?"

"Why, no, Sire," Athelwold responded, trying to meet the King's piercing gaze without flinching. "She's plain, but rich, and money is what I need above everything else at present."

"But is it fair on the lady, Athelwold?" Edgar remarked, somewhat dubiously. "If I judge you rightly, you will soon tire of a woman who is not pretty, especially when you have spent her money."

"It would take a long time to do that," Athelwold observed, "for her father is immensely wealthy. Elfrida and Ordulph, her brother, are his joint heirs, there are no other children, and they will naturally divide his lands and money between them."

"You seem to know the lady's family history fairly well," Edgar said drily. "Have you already proposed to her or mentioned your wish to marry her to her father?"

"I have neither proposed to her nor mentioned my wish to marry her to anyone saving you, Sire," Athelwold answered promptly.

"Then how do you know she will accept you?" the King enquired, with a smile.

"I don't know, Sire," Athelwold responded. "I think, however, if you would be so gracious as to write a letter of recommendation for me to the Earl of Devon, it would go a long way towards making my suit acceptable; nay, it would settle the matter at once."

"I will gladly do as you suggest," Edgar said, for he was genuinely attached to Athelwold and only too pleased to further his fortune. "Only, remember, if you do marry the lady, it is my wish that you should live happily together, not for a brief period only but for the rest of your lives."

"I can assure you, Sire, it will not be my fault if we do not live together all our lives," Athelwold replied. "I will certainly do all that lies in my power to make her a good husband."

Thus the interview ended, and Athelwold, congratulating himself that he had successfully deceived the King, set out on his second journey to Devon, burning with impatience to see the beautiful Elfrida again, and not only to see her but to claim her as his bride.

Arriving, in due course, at his destination, he gave the letter the King had written, at his request, to Orgarius, who, upon reading it, straightway gave his consent to the union Athelwold so ardently desired, and the wedding was celebrated within the next few days.

Athelwold was, of course, extremely happy, but, despite his happiness, he lived in constant fear lest the trick he had played on the King should be discovered, and this fear increased to such an extent that every time he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs

approaching his house—a beautiful mansion which Orgarius had given Elfrida, and which stood close to the castle, her old home—he felt sure it was either the King or one of his emissaries come to denounce him. And his apprehensions were one day realized.

Like most successful men he had enemies, and in his case there were many people, who, being jealous of his friendly relations with the King and the many favours the King bestowed on him, sought, by every means in their power, to do him ill. Now, one of them staying in Devon went spying round the mansion where Athelwold lived, and seeing Elfrida in the woods, he rode back to London in hot haste and informed the King that his favourite had duped him, and that Orgarius's daughter, far from falling short of her reputation for beauty, far exceeded it. She was, he emphatically declared, a great deal lovelier than any woman he had ever beheld.

On being thus informed, Edgar immediately sent one of his own spies to Devon, to ascertain whether such information could be relied upon, and on the latter's confirming it, he decided to pay Athelwold a visit and thereby, with regard to Elfrida's beauty, judge for himself.

“If I am satisfied that what you have told me is correct,” he said to the two men who had brought him exactly similar reports, “and that you are not merely actuated by envy and jealousy of my favourite, I shall execute summary justice on him for his deceit and treachery.”

Obedying a Royal summons to come immediately to London, which was not unusual, Athelwold, all unsuspecting, presented himself at Court, and there learned from Edgar himself of the projected visit.

In a state of agitation, which he could ill conceal,

Athelwold, after thanking the King for the honour he was thus bestowing, begged leave of him to go home at once, in order that he might supervise the preparations that must, of necessity, be made for the entertainment of a Royal guest; and Edgar granted him leave, but with a smile so enigmatic that it filled the petitioner with trepidation.

Hastening home, he immediately sought Elfrida and confessed to her the trick he had played on Edgar, at the same time imploring her to do her best to conceal her beauty from the King, and so save him from punishment and disgrace.

"Do you mean to say the King would have married me, but you prevented him?" Elfrida said coldly. "Is that really true?"

"Yes, it is true," Athelwold replied, "but I was so much in love with you, I would have done anything, risked anything to marry you myself. For God's sake do what I ask, or he will take you from me and I shall lose you, after all."

"Very well," Elfrida answered slowly. "You did wrong, but I will do what you wish, if that will help you." Greatly relieved and counting on his wife's cleverness to get him out of the predicament in which he was placed, he set about making elaborate arrangements for the King's reception. On the eventful day upon which the Royal visitor was expected the preparations, seemingly, were still incomplete, and when the herald arrived at Athelwold's house, announcing that the King would be there shortly, all was bustle and confusion. However, Elfrida was in no way perturbed; she ran laughingly to her room, as she gaily declared, "to make herself as ugly as possible," whilst her husband, on the contrary, feeling in a far from enviable frame of mind, went to meet

their guest. In due course the King, attended by Athelwold, arrived at the house. They found Elfrida in the great entrance hall, waiting to receive them, but, instead of being clad in a coarse ill-fitting garment and looking generally ill-conditioned and unkempt, as she had promised to look, she appeared in her most costly and magnificent robes, and thus arrayed, looked lovelier, far lovelier than her astounded and dismayed husband had ever seen her look before.

"So, this is your wife," Edgar remarked, as he advanced, with a curious smile on his lips, towards the blushing Elfrida. "I thought you told me she was plain."

The unfortunate Athelwold made no attempt to excuse himself. Taken so completely by surprise, he could not utter a word, he could only hang his head in despair, whilst his very silence and confusion testified to his guilt. Elfrida, on the other hand, was all ease, and grace, and gaiety, and so charming did she make herself to the susceptible Edgar, that he soon became enamoured of her, his infatuation becoming every moment more and more obvious. Sitting next to her at the banquet that was held in his honour, he was more than once seen by those present to gaze tenderly in her eyes and touch her fingers caressingly with his.

Athelwold, the while, was enduring the torments of hell. Unutterably jealous and apprehensive, he at last found an opportunity to whisper in her ear :

"What have you done ? How could you ?" And she whispered back :

"I'm sorry. I tried to do as you wished, but found it impossible."

And almost with her next breath she was arranging a clandestine meeting with the King that very night

in the woods. They kept their assignation, and tradition leads us to suppose that Edgar made desperate love to the lady, lying in her beautiful white arms and abandoning himself to her caresses, with all the passion that was so characteristic of him. When they parted, which was not until the dawn had long broken and the labourers in the fields were beginning to start to their work, they kissed long and tenderly.

"And to think I might have been yours long ago," Elfrida whispered, "but for Athelwold's deceit. How I hate and despise him."

"And no wonder! He's behaved in the most dastardly fashion," Edgar responded. "He must be punished. Do you agree, sweetheart?"

"I do," Elfrida answered softly.

"What shall we do with him?" the King whispered.

"Anything," Elfrida laughed, "anything to free me from him, so that I can marry you."

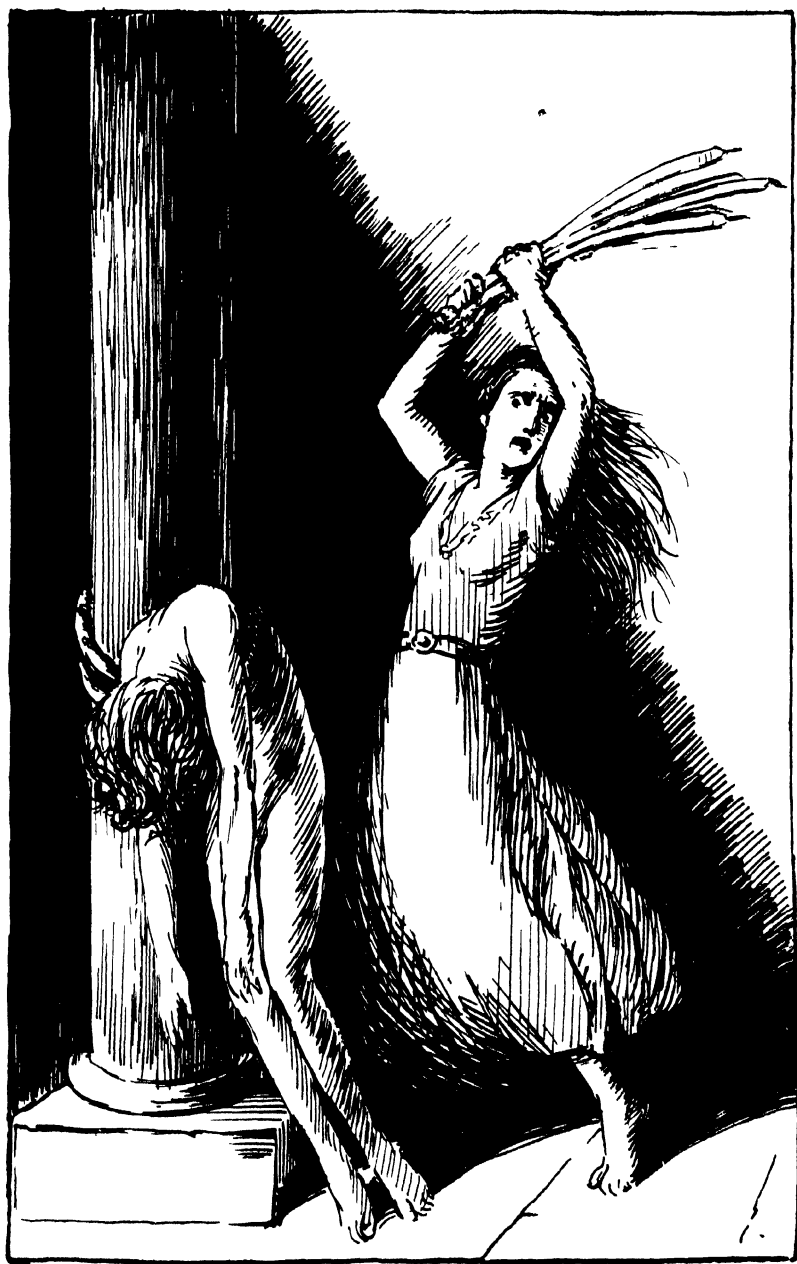
"Then it's death," the King replied hoarsely, looking down into her upturned smiling eyes.

Elfrida nodded.

"Kill him," she said, gently toying with the King's long curling hair as she spoke. "He deserves it."

The following afternoon, a labourer, wending his way home through the forest on Athelwold's estate, all but stumbled over the lifeless body of a man, lying face downwards on the earth. The labourer, observing that it had bled profusely, apparently from several knife wounds in the back, turned it over gently, and looking into its face, uttered an exclamation of horror and dismay.

The man, who had undoubtedly been foully murdered, was Athelwold, his master. Ill news ever flies apace, and it was not long before the whole



ELFRED AT CORFE CASTLE

neighbourhood learned of the tragedy ; but no steps were taken to discover the perpetrators of the deed. All sorts of rumours were current, of course, and when the King went back to London, and Elfrida was seen riding away with him, not clad as a widow should be clad, sombrely, but in her gayest and most magnificent attire, people looked at one another significantly and shook their heads.¹

Some say that Athelwold cursed his murderers before he died, others that one of the monks of Tavistock Abbey,² who had been fond of him, pronounced a curse on them, but, be this as it may, the union of Edgar and Elfrida had disastrous and far reaching results, leading even, with regard to Edgar, to the total extinction of the Royal house from which he was sprung.

Back in London, Edgar married Elfrida as soon as arrangements befitting the occasion could be carried out, but he only lived to enjoy her great beauty six or seven years.

Dying at the early age of thirty-two, he was buried in Glastonbury Abbey, and Masses were sung for his soul by the pious monks, who had ever been his friends. He left two sons, namely, Edward by his first wife Elfleda, or Editha the Fair, and Ethelred by his second wife, Elfrida.

On Edgar's death, Elfrida at once collected all her friends and dependents around her and made a desperate effort to oust Edward from the throne and get her own son, Ethelred, elected in his stead, but

¹ It is generally believed that Edgar and Elfrida were the instigators of the murder, if not the actual perpetrators of it. Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 481, and *Old Castles and Abbeys*, published by John Dicks.

² Founded by Orgarius, it was, for a long time, a great seat of learning, the study of the Saxon language being carried on there as late as the fifteenth century.

in this she was thwarted by Dunstan, whose power was prodigious, even over kings. Filled with the bitterest animosity against both, Dunstan and Edward, and vowing vengeance against them, Elfrida now left London and, accompanied by Ethelred and many of her followers, took up her abode in Corfe Castle.

Stories of midnight raids on the surrounding villages, of robberies, murders, and disappearances soon became associated with her name, and people residing in the neighbourhood of Corfe Castle gave it the widest berth possible. This, however, did not worry Elfrida in the very least. Surrounded by her own band of friends and retainers, whom she ruled with the utmost despotism, she cared little for the outside world, and was strong enough to defy it. King Edward, hoping to win her affection and overcome her resentment to him, continually sent her presents and kindly greetings, offering to promote Ethelred's interests in every way he could; but his advances met with little response, Elfrida receiving them with a haughty indifference and coldly scornful and obviously insincere expressions of gratitude.

Thus, time went on till Edward reached the age of twenty, an age when it was thought desirable that he should marry. That he should marry, however, was a thought most unwelcome to Elfrida, since his marriage would, of course, greatly endanger Ethelred's chances of coming to the throne. Consequently, now that it was talked about, she at once set to work to devise some means of circumventing it. Ambition, when stimulated by the darker passion of hatred, soon becomes familiar with the contemplation of crime, and it was not long before this woman, still in the twenties, with the face of an angel and the soul

of a satan, decided that Edward should die, and commenced planning his death, with as little compunction as she exhibited in ordering the killing of a pig for her dinner.¹ Now, in her household at the time was a clever dwarf named Wulstan,² over whom she had obtained domination, so complete that, had she asked him to walk barefooted over red-hot coals, merely for her edification, he would undoubtedly have done so without demur.

Hence, taking him into her confidence one day, she made him party to a scheme which her cunning brain had already formulated.

An opportunity for putting the scheme into practice soon occurred. The young King, being fond of hunting, was often to be found in the Forest of Wareham, close to Corfe Castle, and one day, when he was hunting there, Wulstan approached him, and telling him some made up story of a strange animal, lured him away from his followers in search of its haunt.

"Now you are so near to him," Wulstan then suddenly remarked, "would you not like to see your little brother, Ethelred? He is so fond of you. He is always asking after his big brother, the King."

The good-natured Edward acquiesced, and, accompanying the dwarf, speedily arrived at Corfe Castle. There, the Queen was at that moment conferring with a dark sinister-looking ruffian called Gunthurm, another of her satellites over whom she is said to have gained complete domination, and both started as they heard the horn blown in summons at the outer gate of the Castle.

¹ If there is any truth in rumour, she took a special delight in killing pigs and cattle, and tried to make Ethelred watch her, so as to accustom him to the sight of blood.

² Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 87.

A few seconds later, Wulstan, bursting into the apartment, announced, with a broad grin, the arrival of the King.

"Alone!" Elfrida and Gunthurm exclaimed in chorus.

"Yes, alone," Wulstan rejoined, with a triumphant leer.

The three conspirators then looked at one another stealthily. Wulstan was the first to speak.

"Have I your permission to show him in?" he asked, grinning from ear to ear. "I fear he will be getting impatient."

"Tell him," Elfrida said haughtily, "it is my wish that he should dine with us, and, sinking her voice to a whisper, "Remember, both of you, if you would retain my favour, he must never leave the castle—alive. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes," Wulstan responded, still grinning and giving the dagger that was stuck in Gunthurm's belt a playful pat, "we understand right enough, and your wishes shall be fulfilled to the very letter. Have no fear on that score, lady."

He then bowed and, with a hideous grimace, left the apartment, accompanied by Gunthurm. As the minutes sped by and the King did not come, Elfrida at last grew anxious and, quitting the apartment, went to the castle entrance to ascertain the cause.

The King was seated on his horse in front of the gates, talking to Ethelred.

"Won't you come in?" Elfrida said, going up to him and kissing him.

"Thank you very much," Edward replied, "but I must return to my followers, or else they will wonder what has become of me."

"You will at least have a goblet of wine before

you go ? ” Elfrida remarked, and beckoning to one of her attendants—some say it was Gunthurm, and some another of her satellites—she told him to fetch a goblet of her choicest wine to give to the King. Then happened the dreadful tragedy which takes its place in history as one of the very foulest and blackest deeds on record.

The young King, all unsuspecting, had raised the goblet to his lips, and was in the act of drinking its contents, when either Elfrida herself,¹ or the man who had fetched the wine, stabbed him in the back. Though mortally wounded, Edward yet had strength enough left to set spurs to his horse and gallop away towards the forest, where he had left his followers. He had not gone far, however, before he fainted from loss of blood, and falling from his saddle, but not clear of the stirrups, he was dragged a considerable distance, before his affrighted steed at last stopped of its own accord.

Seeing him ride off thus, Elfrida, fearing he would escape, sent certain of her retainers, presumably Gunthurm and Wulstan, after him, with instructions to prevent his getting away, at all costs. She then retired indoors, and alighting upon Ethelred, who was awaiting her, a terrible scene took place between them. Ethelred, apparently, had witnessed the murder, and he now upbraided his mother for the part she had played in it, calling her many names which she richly deserved. Elfrida retaliated most effectively. She first of all stripped him, and then beat him so severely on the body, with her bare hands to begin with, and then, her hands getting tired, with great wax tapers she took from a stack close by, that

¹ From what one knows of Elfrida's character it seems quite likely that she did the deed herself.

he bled all over and suffered excruciating pain.¹ Having relieved her feelings to some extent thus, she gave him a few parting cuffs, and then, as Gunthurm and Wulstan had not yet returned, she hastened after them, anxious to learn what was delaying them. She at length discovered them bending over Edward's body.

Whether they had stabbed him again, history does not say, but he was quite dead, and his face was shockingly disfigured by the flints over which he had been dragged.

With ill-concealed joy, Elfrida had the body placed in a hut close by, and the next day, by her orders, it was dragged to a marshy piece of ground and left there. It was subsequently discovered by Elfrida's enemies and given a king's burial.

Although Elfrida's participation in the crime was suspected and, perhaps, known, it did not debar Ethelred from ascending the throne, and, in due course, he was crowned King.

Dunstan, however, in placing the Royal diadem on his head, accompanied the act with these words :² "Even as, by the death of thy brother, thou dost aspire to the kingdom, hear the decree of Heaven. The sin of thy wicked mother and of her accomplices shall rest upon thy head, and such evils shall fall upon the English as they have never yet suffered, from the days when they first came into the isle of Britain even until the present time." This is known as Dunstan's curse, but it is popularly believed that Dunstan, either at the same time or later, pronounced a second curse, both on Elfrida and her home, that is to say, Corfe Castle.

¹ He is said to have hated the sight of wax tapers ever afterwards. Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 88.

² Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 88.

Three years after the coronation of Ethelred, Dunstan's prediction relative to England began to be realized.

Once again the dreaded warships of the Danes swarmed the English Channel; London and other towns were plundered and destroyed, and England endured such misery as she had rarely, if ever, endured before.

And all the while public animus against Elfrida, who was generally regarded as the cause of all the evils, was steadily increasing. In addition to the murders of Athelwold and Edward, other crimes and atrocities were attributed to her, and rumour credited her and her followers with unspeakable cruelties. Fearful screams were frequently heard by passers by at night, proceeding from the dark walls of Corfe Castle, and the servitors employed there, when conversing with the neighbouring country folk, hinted at vessels being lured on the rocks on the sea coast by means of false lights, and of awful tortures being inflicted, by order of Elfrida, on the unfortunate wretches who fell into her hands. At last, she became so cruel and despotic that her own retainers, who appear to have been nothing more nor less than a band of hired assassins, unable to endure her harsh rule any longer, deserted her in a body, and she was left practically alone in the castle.

She appears to have continued living there in her altered circumstances for some time, acting as haughtily and imperiously as ever to the few with whom she still came in contact, but the hatred her fellow-creatures, one and all, conceived for her, at last made itself felt, and, in order to redeem herself in the eyes of the world, when she could endure its

contumely no longer, she declared her intention of abandoning her former life and entering a convent.¹

Before taking the veil, however, she built and endowed the nunneries of Amesbury, in Wiltshire, and Wherwell, in Hampshire. If one can believe tradition, her last days were spent in great austerity at Wherwell; and on her deathbed there she confessed to such a category of terrible crimes, that the pure-minded nuns attending her and praying for her were immeasurably shocked. It was thus, then, that Elfrida, according to tradition, died, and it was thus, perhaps, that Corfe Castle, as the scene of ghastly deeds, obtained a reputation second to none. It was doomed, apparently, by Dunstan's curse, to live up to this reputation; for some centuries later, it became the residence of that devil incarnate, King John. He, it would seem, in 1202, thrust into one of the castle's darkest and dankest cells twenty-two French prisoners, and there caused them to be slowly starved to death.

Then, as if still further to emulate Elfrida's atrocities, he seized Peter of Pomfret, a poor hermit, for prophesying he would shortly lose the throne, and after subjecting him to innumerable tortures, finally had him dragged along the ground by horses, to and fro Wareham, and after that hanged just outside the castle walls. Jews, arrested in London, were brought to Corfe, to be racked and roasted, while other crimes, some not only too harrowing, but too revolting to bear narration, were likewise committed within the castle walls, and the place once again became an object of dread and terror.

Happily, John did not live very long, and after his

¹ A not unusual course of procedure, in those and even later days, for sinners on a very extensive scale,

death Corfe Castle would seem to have enjoyed a brief immunity from horrors, other, perhaps, than those of alleged ghosts, till the reign of Edward II, when, by order of that demon woman, Isabella, and her paramour Mortimer, the poor deposed King was brought to Corfe Castle and immured in one of its foulest and most crime stained cells. After enduring indescribable discomfort and indignities here, he was taken to Berkeley Castle, where, by order of the Queen again, he was murdered in so barbarous and ghastly a fashion, that his screams penetrated the castle walls and could be heard at a considerable distance beyond them.

After his departure from Corfe, however, that castle would seem to have enjoyed a long period of comparative tranquillity, though it frequently changed hands, no one family retaining it for any great length of time. For instance, on Isabella's imprisonment in Norfolk, the castle became the property of Edward III, who gave it to the Earl of Holland. From his family it passed—how I do not know—into the possession of the unfortunate George, Duke of Clarence, brother of Edward IV, who, tradition asserts, perished in a butt of wine. After that, it remained Crown property, till the reign of Henry VII, when it was given to the King's mother, the Countess of Richmond. On her death, it once again reverted to the Crown, and remained Crown property till Queen Elizabeth bestowed it on Sir Christopher Hatton. The Hattons continued to occupy it till the reign of Charles I, when Sir John Banks, afterwards Lord Chief Justice of England, bought it from Lady Coke, widow of Sir John Coke, and formerly of Sir William Hatton.

On the outbreak of the Civil War, Sir John Banks joined the King's Army, leaving his wife and children,

as he hoped in safety, in Corfe Castle. The castle, however, was at once attacked by strong forces of Parliamentarians under Captain Butler, Governor of Wareham, and Colonel Bingham, Governor of Poole. Lady Banks, aided by Colonel Anketill and some of his troops, made a gallant defence, and they would, probably, have beaten off the enemy, but for the dastardly behaviour of Colonel Pitman, one of Colonel Anketill's officers. This infamous miscreant, in the sure hope of receiving a reward and pardon from the Cromwellian leaders, betrayed Lady Banks and her allies into the hands of the besiegers; and they, though they spared the lives of Lady Banks and most of her followers, plundered the castle and reduced it to ruins.

Now, whether or not this act was looked upon as a fitting finale to the existence of a building so permeated with crime, no one has ever thought fit to rebuild the castle, and to-day its crumbling, ivy-clad walls alone remain to remind us of Dunstan's curse and its strange fulfilment.

CHAPTER XIII

THE QUAKER'S CURSE

ABOUT the middle of the seventeenth century at Todthorne, near Grayrigg, in Westmoreland, there lived an eminent member of the Society of Friends, a Quaker, named Francis Howgill.¹

Now, at that date, the Society of Friends had not been in existence very long, and its members, like the earliest members of the Salvation Army, came in for much ridicule and abuse, and were subjected to a great deal of petty persecution from all classes of society. Moreover, at that early period in their history they were dealt with very severely by the law, whenever they attempted to make converts, and Howgill had been repeatedly warned that if he continued to air his religious opinions in public he would be punished. Warnings, however, had no effect on the fanatical Howgill. With singular obstinacy he still continued to propound his unpalatable doctrines out of doors, and not content with preaching in and around Grayrigg, he visited, in conjunction with John Camm, his Quaker friend, who was a preacher, too, all the towns of any size in the South of England and there held forth to increased numbers, with a correspondingly increased vigour.

All seems to have gone well with Howgill and Camm, however, till they came to Bristol; and here

¹ My authorities for this story are *Early Cumberland and Westmoreland Friends*, by — Ferguson, and Backhouse's *Life of Howgill*.

the crowds they addressed continually heckled and booed them. Had they been wise, they would have retired, for a time at any rate, but this they would not do, and Howgill only incensed his hearers the more by tactlessly rebuking them and threatening them with the wrath of Heaven.

The few present who sympathized with him took up the cudgels on his behalf, and ceasing to bandy words resorted to blows. The disturbances spread, of course, and a riot, in which half the populace of the city became embroiled, was the result.

However, it was not until Howgill and Camm at last realized that they were in actual danger of their lives, that they thought fit to leave Bristol and pursue their discourses elsewhere. Eventually, having decided to return to Westmoreland, they arrived at Kendal, and there found an unpleasant surprise awaiting them.

It seems the authorities in Bristol, blaming Howgill and Camm for all the expense to which they had been put, in consequence of the recent riots, and determining they should not escape scot free, communicated with the authorities in Kendal, reporting what had occurred and calling upon them to punish the culprits. Thus, no sooner had Howgill, who had parted company with Camm, entered the market-place of Kendal, to deliver an oration there, than he was arrested by the police and conducted to an adjacent inn, where the local magistrates were holding court. He was asked to take the oath of allegiance, and, on his stubbornly refusing, he was committed to Appleby jail, to take his trial at the forthcoming Assizes.

On his refusing to take the oath of allegiance at the Court of Assizes, he was recommitted to prison, but

the presiding judge, who appears to have been, for those times at least, a humanely disposed man, offered to release him till the next Assizes, when he would again have to come up for trial, if he would guarantee to be of good behaviour, i.e. desist from preaching in the interim. This he obstinately refused to do, and the judge, losing patience with him, committed him to jail.

Some weeks later, on his applying for permission to go home for a few days, to attend to urgent private business, strange to relate, it was granted him, and for the time being he was free. Subsequently, his business attended to, Howgill, who was still boiling over with indignation at what he considered his most harsh and unjust treatment, instead of returning at once to prison, as a strictly conscientious person most assuredly would have done, hastened off, accompanied by a friend, to Grayrigg Hall, the seat of a Mr. Duckett,¹ one of the local magistrates, by whom Howgill had repeatedly been reprimanded, and whom, apparently, for that reason, he looked upon as one of the worst of his persecutors.

There is no statement in any record as to what Mr. Duckett was doing when the two infuriated Quakers were ushered into his presence. As the day was well advanced, however, we may reasonably suppose he was sitting by his fireside smoking, with a glass of old port—that being a very favourite beverage in those days—by his side. On seeing his visitors, he gave a most perceptible start, as well he might, since, having noted with satisfaction that Howgill was being kept in jail till the next Assizes, he was under the impression that that quarrelsome and

¹ It is to this person, merely styled "J.D.," that we owe the account of what took place during the interview.

turbulent individual was safely out of the way for some considerable time to come.

"Why, how now, Francis!" he stuttered, rubbing his eyes, to make sure that what he saw was not due to the excellency of his wine. "What brings you here? I thought you were in Appleby jail."

"So I was, and so I shall be again, shortly, thanks to thee and those other sons of Belial who share thy office," Howgill retorted. He then lapsed into silence, apparently too overcome with his emotions to speak, but at the same time glaring at Duckett, who involuntarily shrunk back, devoutly wishing that the bell he used for summoning his servant was a little nearer to hand.

"What do you want of me, Francis?" he stammered.

"Want of thee! Nothing!" Howgill said sternly. "I have come to thee, Duckett, with a message from the Lord. Thou has persecuted the Lord's people, but His hand is now against thee, and He will send a blast upon all that thou hast, and thy name shall rot out of the earth, and this thy dwelling shall become desolate, and a habitation for owls and jackdaws."

"Good heavens!" Duckett ejaculated, looking immeasurably scared, for like most people in those days he was very superstitious, "you are not in earnest?"

"I am in earnest," Howgill answered solemnly, "very much in earnest. What I have uttered is the Lord's word, and there are many living now who will see it fulfilled."

He then turned round and, accompanied by his friend, left the room, Duckett sinking back into his chair, too overcome with horror to move or speak.

Subsequently, Howgill, I believe, though I cannot

state it as a recorded fact, went back to prison, congratulating himself on the success of his interview.

The curse he pronounced on Duckett, if we can regard as valid the testimony of Mr. James Wilson, a member of the Society of Friends, and resident at Grayrigg Foot, in Westmoreland, was fulfilled to the very letter. The tide of fortune turned against Duckett soon after Howgill's visit, his prosperity waned, and he was tormented with financial troubles and troubles of every sort for the rest of his life. His children (who, by the way, died childless, which, it might be said, was in accordance with the curse) being, on account of his misfortunes, naturally very much reduced in circumstances,¹ sold Grayrigg Hall, and the Lowthers, who bought it from them, apparently neither caring to live in it themselves, nor to let it, allowed it to stand empty. Consequently, it soon fell into ruins, and in the ruins, it was noted, owls took up their abode and jackdaws made their nests. Now not even the ruins of Grayrigg Hall remain, since in, or about, the year 1777 they were cleared away, and in their place was erected a comfortable looking farmhouse.

I would remark, in conclusion, that all the prophecies contained in the curse Howgill pronounced upon Duckett being so clearly verified, one cannot help thinking, perhaps, that Howgill may have had some foundation other than religious fanaticism for attributing his curse to the Lord. Was he, we wonder, merely vengeful or inspired ?

¹ James Wilson asserts that some of the Ducketts even begged for bread at the doors of their old friends and neighbours.

CHAPTER XIV

A KING'S CURSE

IN the ninth century the English were harassed by many foes, but none more terrible than the Danes. Brave, skilful in battle, and fiendishly cruel, they gave no quarter, and when sacking towns and villages, slew everyone, including the women and children they found in them, without the least compunction. Indeed, the Raven banner, as their insignia was styled, off the English coast struck terror in every heart, and so great was the dread inspired in the hearts of the English by those who bore it, that a special prayer, namely, "From the fury of the Danes, good Lord, deliver us," was embodied in their Church Liturgy and recited, most probably, in every church and at every service. And the Church even more, perhaps, than the laity had need to make use of this prayer, for the Danes would seem to have taken a peculiar delight in destroying ecclesiastical property and massacring the clergy. To name only a few instances, the Abbeys of Croyland, Medhamsted (Peterborough), Marney, Ramsey and Ely were all laid in ruins by them, whilst their inmates were murdered in the most barbarous fashion.

In or about the year 870 they suddenly swooped down on East Anglia. Now, the East Anglians had at that time a king named Edmund, who was celebrated alike for his valour and piety, and who, directly he heard that the Danes were coming,

collected an army together and prepared to give them battle. He met the enemy on the banks of the Waveney,¹ near Eye, and a terrible struggle took place.

For a long time the English, led by Edmund in person, held their own. Undaunted, they repelled rush after rush of the huge, red haired Danes, in the most heroic fashion; but numbers told in the end, and the ranks of the East Anglians were at last compelled to give way before the enemy, who came on and on in seemingly never ending myriads. What then followed must in some respects have resembled Isandlwana.

Anything in the nature of an orderly retreat being impossible, as the forces were engaged in hand to hand fighting, and wedged far too closely together, a regular mêlée ensued. While some of the gallant East Anglians fought shoulder to shoulder, surrounded on all sides by surging masses of Danes, who, yelling furiously, slashed, hacked, and thrust at them with battle-axe, sword, and spear; others, throwing aside their armour and everything that impeded them, tried to escape.

Edmund remained till the last fatal rush of the Danes took place, and then, realizing that to stay any longer on the battlefield would only mean capture or death, he either rode or ran in the direction of Hoxne, a stream of fugitives following in his wake. When he arrived at Hoxne, he was too spent to go any further, and the cries and screams of his followers warning him that the Danes were close at hand, butchering all whom they overtook, he concealed himself, as best he could, by crouching under the bridge over the Waveney, subsequently known as Goldbridge.

¹ Vide Sir Francis Palgrave's *Anglo-Saxon History*.

Presently the shrieks and groans of the killed and tortured became fewer and fewer and silence ensued, broken only by the distant howling of a dog and the occasional chirruping of birds. Night gradually coming on, the King, who was feeling somewhat stronger, in spite of his long fast, was thinking of emerging from his hiding-place and continuing his flight to some place further removed from the scene of the battle, when, upon hearing the sound of approaching voices, he decided to remain where he was for the present.

The voices, he perceived, on their drawing nearer, belonged to a youth and maiden, who, judging from their conversation, had just been married and were now returning home. Bridges would ever seem to possess a peculiar fascination for lovers, and the happy pair, pausing on Goldbridge, leaned over its parapet and peered down below into the moonlit water.

Presently, their eyes wandering to the river's bank, caught the glitter of something very bright that was peeping out from the long grass that grew there. Wondering what it could be and speculating excitedly, they crept very quietly down the banks towards it, and found it to be a golden spur on the heel of a man crouching under the bridge, in an obvious attempt to hide himself there. Judging from the fact that he was very richly clad that he was someone of importance, they thought they might, perhaps, obtain a reward by betraying him to the Danes. Anyhow, they would try to, and they had no sooner conceived this infamous scheme than they hurried off to put it into practice.

Espying a party of Danes in a field close at hand, they had not far to go to find the means of attaining

their object, and consequently, before the unfortunate Edmund had made up his mind what to do, whether to remain longer in his hiding-place or push further afield, his betrayers returned to the bridge, bringing the Danes with them. The latter the moment they saw Edmund, recognized him, and with loud shouts of savage joy, they dragged him from his hiding-place. It was then, when he realized that he had been betrayed by the young married couple, who now stood guiltily before him, that he uttered his famous malediction.

Looking them sternly in the face, he called down Heaven's wrath on their heads and on the heads of all newly married couples who should venture to cross the bridge they had crossed in the future. According to the testimony of Edmund's sword-bearer, who was apparently an eye-witness of the scene, the Danes, for some reason or another, spared his life but kept him a prisoner. Edmund was then loaded with fetters and dragged, with many blows and insults, to the Danish camp. There he was brought before the Danish leader, who offered to release him if he would deny Christ and worship the Danish gods, and on his refusal to do so, he was ordered to be stripped and scourged with whips. Then, as he still refused, he was tied to a tree and fired at with arrows, the Danes taking care, however, not to hit him in any vital spot. At last, when there was no space on his body for another arrow, and the Danes had grown tired of pricking him with their spears and inflicting endless other tortures on him, he was again called upon to renounce Christ, and on his still refusing as vehemently as he could, with the little breath he had left, he was first of all dismembered and then beheaded, his remains being afterwards

scattered broadcast in the adjacent wood. He was rightly canonized as a saint and martyr, and his name is still retained in the Church Calendar.

An extraordinary story, regarded as authentic by the Church, is told of what happened soon after his death.

A party of his intimate and devoted friends resolved, at the risk of their lives, to go into the wood referred to, for the purpose of collecting his remains and giving them a Christian burial. Accordingly, they chose a bright moonlight night, and having first of all ascertained that no Danes were in the immediate vicinity of the wood, they stole thither, silently and stealthily.

For a long time they searched diligently, but with no success. Not a vestige of the remains could they discover anywhere. Moreover, they were constantly startled by cracklings in the brushwood, which, owing no doubt to the excited state of their nerves, they attributed to the footsteps of people persistently dogging them; but, strange to say, whenever they paused and listened, which they frequently did with bated breath, invariably the silence was only broken by the rustling of the gentle night breeze through the foliage, accompanied, sometimes, by the cry of a night bird, or of some animal in its sleep. Once a sound that might be termed a howl, indescribably weird and ominous, made them start and lay their hands on their weapons, exclaiming, "A wolf!"¹ But the wolf, if wolf it were, did not reveal itself, and the howl was not repeated. At last, tired out and almost in despair of ever finding what they were looking for, they sat down under an elm and, in a melancholy and superstitious frame of mind, gazed

¹ Wolves at that time were very numerous in England.

at the many dark shadows that were cast on the ground around them.

"Isn't it somewhere near here, Edgar, that Alfred the woodcutter hung himself?" one of them suddenly observed.

"Aye, in that glade opposite," Edgar responded, pointing to a clearing in the wood, immediately facing the spot where they sat. "I was one of the party who found him."

"I wonder why he did it," the first speaker said, "and what made him choose such a lonely spot."

"I can't say for certain, of course," Edgar responded, "but as I've been told this wood is haunted, it's my belief that, may be, Alfred was tempted to do away with himself by some evil spirit. Didn't you see something here once, Leofric?"

"Yes," Leofric, another of the party, exclaimed. "It was . . ."

"Hush!" Morca, the first of the speakers, whispered.

The party instantly became silent and adopted a listening attitude, intent on catching the slightest sound; and this time they were not mistaken, they distinctly heard a movement in the brushwood behind them, and they were preparing to spring to their feet and fight, if necessary, for their lives, when a dark form, bursting through the thick undergrowth of bushes by their side, scurried past them with a loud grunt and disappeared amid the shadows of the surrounding trees.

"A boar!" Edgar exclaimed, "and what a fine one!"

"Aye!" Leofric ejaculated, "that it was, and I'm so hungry."

At this very material remark, despite the solemnity

of the occasion, they all laughed, excepting Morca, who got up, remarking impatiently :

“ Enough of this, let us get on with our search.”

Then, half in earnest and half mockingly, he cried out :

“ Where art thou, old comrade ? Tell us where to look ? ”

And to everyone's horror and amazement a voice, strangely like, and yet in some peculiar indefinable way not altogether like, King Edmund's voice, responded : “ Here, here, here ! ”

The faces of all present visibly paled, their stalwart limbs shook, and for some moments they were far too frightened to speak.

At last Morca broke the silence.

“ Come,” he whispered hoarsely, “ let us go and search the spot where the voice came from ; there, maybe, we shall find something.” And he started off, followed by the rest of the party, who kept close to him and to one another, whilst they held their weapons in readiness to strike at once, should they fall into an ambush.

Pushing their way through the bushes and thrusting aside the branches of trees that barred their progress, they advanced slowly and cautiously, prepared at any instant to fight or fly, whichever their leader advised, and they had just arrived at a small clearing, when he suddenly stopped and pointed to something lying on the ground, in the full path of the moonbeams. Looking in the direction he indicated they saw a human limb.

Convinced now that they were dealing with some superphysical agency, they silently interchanged awesome glances, undecided what to do next. Morca, again, was the first to speak.

"Something tells me to call again," he said, "and see if the voice replies."

He did so, and, in response, the same peculiar voice cried out, from somewhere close at hand :
"Here, here, here !"

"Follow me," Morca whispered to his companions, "we may, nay, I am sure we shall, make another discovery." Again he led the way, again his companions followed at his heels, keeping, if possible, closer to one another than heretofore, and again, upon arriving at a moonlit space, they saw a human limb lying on the ground. More and more of the murdered King's remains were discovered, each separate piece being identified by certain fragments of clothing and jewellery attaching to it, till the corpse was complete all but the head.

"I will ask for guidance once more," Morca said, "and I question not we shall find the head."

He then called out as before, and the voice made exactly the same reply. This time, however, a surprise was awaiting them. Advancing in the direction from which the voice came, and arriving at an open space, as they had done on previous occasions, they now saw, lying on the ground in the centre of the space, not only a head—the head they were looking for, of their beloved King—but, standing beside it, a huge, grey, gaunt, and half-famished-looking wolf. Its object in standing there was obviously to keep guard over the head, for instead of snarling or exhibiting any indications of anger or fear at the sight of Morca and his companions, it appeared to be pleased to see them, and at once moved to one side, so that they could take the head up and place it with the other remains. Realizing then that the

affair had become more mysterious than ever, since the wolf's behaviour could be due only to a miracle, they knelt down and, then and there, returned thanks to God for having intervened in order that they might bring their search to a successful termination. They then reverently picked up the remains and carried them to a secure hiding-place, the wolf, who had been watching them the whole time in a most friendly and sympathetic manner, following them, like a dog, all the way.¹ However, directly the remains were deposited safely, it turned round and walking, presumably, back to its haunt in the wood, was never, so far as is known, seen by any of them again. Eventually the King's body was removed to Badrichesworth,² and there buried. Years afterwards, King Canute, to atone for his countrymen's horrible crime in so barbarously murdering a brave and good king, built a monastery at Badrichesworth and dedicated it to St. Edmund, who, in the meanwhile, had been canonized and was now rightly revered by friends and foes alike as a saint.

Referring once more to the newly married couple who had so basely betrayed the King, there is no record as to whether or not any special misfortune befell them, but if the King's curse, with regard to them, were as efficacious as many other curses pronounced with far less reason and provocation have been with regard to others far less guilty, then we can rest assured they knew little happiness and, in all probability, came to an untimely and tragic end. At any rate, the people of Hoxne so firmly believed in the efficacy of the curse, generally, that

¹ Vide *Picturesque England*, p. 216.

² Known to-day as Bury St. Edmunds.



Vere Ca pbell

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from that day it was uttered right down to the year 1881¹, no newly married couple in that district could be prevailed upon to cross Goldbridge, their avowed reason being that they did not wish to come under the ban of the King's curse.

¹ For corroboration see *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, by Sir Francis Palgrave.

CHAPTER XV

A QUARTET OF CURSES

"The Idiot's Curse."

ON the outskirts of Towneley Park, about two and a half miles east of Burnley, stands Barcroft Hall, a fine historic mansion. In front of it, and close to it, is a stone mounting block, such as one finds at Kenyon Peel Hall, Clayton Hall, Extwisle Hall, and other old houses in the Counties palatine. Most of the back part of the building (which, by the way, occupies the site of a much older house) dates back to the time of Henry VIII; the main front having been added in 1614, and the embattled gateway in 1636.¹ One of the chief features of its interior is a dining-hall, that measures thirty-six feet in length, and contains an ingle capable of seating a fairly large family. The ceiling of this dining-hall is remarkable, since it is almost entirely composed of very large and finely moulded oak beams. The original Barcroft Hall belonged to the Barcroft family, as long ago as the reign of Henry III; and the property remained in their possession till towards the end of the seventeenth century.

The chief interest attached to the place lies in the tradition that a curse is associated with it.² The tradition affirms that centuries ago two brothers, presumably Barcrofts, lived at the hall, and that

¹ Vide *Old Halls in Lancashire and Cheshire*, by H. Taylor.

² Vide *Lancashire Legends*, by Messrs. Wilkinson & Harland.

the elder of the two, who was heir to the estates belonging to the hall, was of very weak intellect. Now, the younger brother, a very ambitious, avaricious man, being desirous of obtaining the property, at length conceived the diabolical idea of shutting his elder brother up in a cellar of the house and starving him to death. The task proved a very easy one, as the poor idiot, taken by surprise, offered little resistance, and the house being situated in a very lonely spot, there was no need to fear that his cries would be heard by passers by. Fastened with chains to an iron staple in the wall of the darkest and dankest cellar, he was told he would be kept there till he died, and that the sooner that event took place the better it would be for him. It was a ghastly place—here and there on the uneven stone floor were pools of filthy rank smelling water, in which every now and then a water rat or toad would splash; and cockroaches and other vermin continually fell down on the wretched captive from the low fungus-covered ceiling or crawled over his bare shivering feet. His screams and jabberings met with no response. Occasionally his brother would open the door at the top of the cellar steps to hear if he were still alive, but no one else ever ventured near; the servants, if they knew he was there, were far too afraid of their young master to attempt to render his victim any assistance.

And so the hours passed wearily and horribly enough, with little, if any, light, less food, and only the clammy stones for a resting place. While he was still enduring this hell, his brother gave out that he was dead and calmly took possession of the Barcroft estates. Though ugly rumours soon began to circulate concerning the fate of the elder brother, the law, for

some reason or another, did not think fit to intervene, and the usurper of the property was allowed to remain in undisputed possession of it. Death at last freed the idiot from his sufferings, but tradition asserts that before he died he had an extraordinary lucid interval, in which he first of all cursed his brother, and then predicted that the latter would never again be happy, and that the male line of Barcrofts, rapidly become poorer and poorer, would soon cease, the Barcroft estates passing into the hands of strangers. We are not told who heard him utter this curse, but it seems quite likely that when he uttered it several people were present, including his brother and sister-in-law, who was doubtless not only aware of all that was going on, but was not improbably the actual instigator of the dreadful crime.

Anyhow, no matter who they might be, those who heard the curse pronounced, so tradition declares, mocked the poor sufferer, attributing his utterances to the mere jabberings of a lunatic. That they were wrong, however, the coming years were not slow to prove. Though sole owner of the property he had so long coveted, the younger brother was never happy. Troubles of all sorts marred the harmony of his home life, and he was certainly tortured with visions of his poor demented victim. In sleep he dreamed of him, dreamed of him crouching on the slimy cellar floor, with the rats and cockroaches running over his bare shuddering limbs; while in waking hours he kept fancying he could hear, coming from some distant part of the house, the jangling of chains and the jabberings of a maniac. Thus, in a very short time he died, a prematurely old man, hounded to death by worries and his own conscience.

After his decease the succeeding generations of Barcrofts gradually became poorer and poorer, till, on the death of Thomas Barcroft, who died without male issue, in 1688, the property was sold by his daughter, Elizabeth, to Henry Bradshaw, of Marple Hall, Cheshire. The estates thus passing into the hands of strangers, the idiot's curse was literally fulfilled.¹

“The Curse of Kirkham Priory.”

The ruins of Kirkham Priory, situated in the delightfully wooded valley of the Derwent, can be seen from the North Eastern Railway. They lie about six miles south-west of Malton, and fifteen miles north-east of York. Owing to the fact that no trace remains of some parts of the original structure, while portions of the ruins, still in existence, are almost entirely hidden by a thick growth of weeds and herbage, it is difficult to ascertain the area the Priory once covered; but, judging by what one can see of the foundations, the original structure must have been very extensive. The generally accepted tradition asserts that it was founded by Sir Walter L'Espece, knight, and his wife Adeline, in or about the year 1121, under tragic circumstances.² Sir Walter and Lady L'Espece had an only son who was passionately fond of riding. While out hunting one day near Kirkham, the youth's horse suddenly took fright, and the young L'Espece was pitched from the saddle and killed. The parents were inconsolable; they had much land and money, and now no child to whom they might leave it. In their sorrow they

¹ After passing through the hands of the Bradshaws, Pimlotes, and Isherwoods, the estates were, in 1795, bought by Charles Towneley, the celebrated antiquarian.

² Vide *Pictureque England*, by L. Valentine, and *The History and Legends of Old Castles*, published by John Dicks.

turned to Sir Walter's uncle, the Rector of Garton, for comfort, and he advised Sir Walter to seek consolation in Christ, that is to say, he advised him to found churches and other religious houses, thus making Christ his heir. Adopting his uncle's counsel, Sir Walter first of all founded the Priory¹ of Kirkham, the altar of which is said to have been erected so as to mark the exact spot upon which young L'Espece was thrown and killed. Sir Walter endowed the Priory² "with seven churches appropriated thereto, the profits of which, together with the rents and other possessions in Yorkshire and Northumberland, amounted to 1100 marks, a large sum in those days."³

Prior to the general dissolution, the Priory was valued at £300 15s. 6d., according to Speed, and at £269 5s. 6d., according to Dugdale; and belonging to it were thirty fodder of lead, 440 ounces of plate, and seven bells. It was surrendered December 8, 1539, the thirtieth year of Henry VIII's reign, and granted to Sir Henry Knevet, knight, and Anne his wife; but in the third year of Edward VI's reign the Earl of Rutland held it under the tenure of military service. In the fifth year of Elizabeth's reign licence was granted the Earl to alienate the manors of Bilesdale, Stipertow, and Ryalx for the Priory lands, and either sell or let them on lease to Edward Yachman and Richard Lambert.

As has already been stated, the Priory is now a mere mass of ruins. A noble Gothic tower, covered all over

¹ He founded also the Abbeys of Rievaulx and Warden.

² Vide Burton's *Monasticon*.

³ Sir Walter's two charters to the Priory, with an agreement between Hugh, Prior of Kirkham, and Wilham de Ros, respecting the right to hunt upon the demesnes mentioned in the agreement, are extant, and can be seen in the Appendix to Dugdale's Account of Kirkham Priory.

with ivy, stood until the year 1784, when it was blown down in a storm.

“ The northern part of the gate ”¹ and a small part of the wall of the chancel were still in evidence some years ago, as also were some of the cellars. The latter, however, were in a very crumbling condition.

A variety of legends and traditions cluster round Kirkham Priory, and of these, perhaps the best known one is as follows: Sir Henry Knevet, to whom the Priory was granted at the time of its Dissolution, was a greedy, heartless individual, and ignoring all entreaties for a respite, he insisted that the abbess and nuns should vacate the Priory at once, even going so far as to despatch a body of armed soldiers thither, with orders to see that his mandate was obeyed. In these circumstances, sadly the nuns issued from their beloved home, to go into a world, of which most of them knew nothing, their stately abbess leading them, and disdaining even to glance at the crowd, consisting mostly of Sir Henry's retainers and workmen, who were watching them.

Now, it so happened that the convent chapel was at that time being rebuilt, and Sir Henry, having put a stop to its construction, and ordered the stones in it to be used for the building of an additional wing to his private residence, was occupied one day in watching the builders at work on this wing, when the abbess, whom he had so recently expelled, accompanied by six aged and venerable nuns, approached him and said that she wished to speak to him. Though fierce and overbearing to a degree, Sir Henry was, nevertheless, so impressed by the dauntless and stately bearing of the abbess that he acceded to her

¹ Vide *Old Castles and Abbeys*.

request; whereupon she addressed him sternly thus:¹ "When you drove me and mine from our holy shelter I breathed no word of anger or reproach against you, but taught my daughters to submit to persecution with a mild patience. But it was told me in my place of refuge that the spoliator of the church had laid profane hands on walls consecrated to divine worship, and lo! I am here, I, a weak woman, stand boldly forth the champion of my Church, and in Her name I curse the house that is established by sacrilege. Every third heir of every branch of thy family that shall possess the desecrated heritage of the church shall perish untimely, beginning with thy son's son, who never shall enjoy the wealth thou hast perilled thy soul to gain." Having uttered these words the abbess turned round and, accompanied by her followers, walked away with the stately dignified air that was characteristic of her. Sir Henry, not knowing what else to do, smiled, as if he thought the whole thing a mere joke, but the fact that he listened in silence to the abbess, from first to last, inclines one to think that her speech impressed him more than he cared to own.

The curse has been fulfilled to the very letter. Every third heir to the Kirkham Priory in the Knevet family died, before inheriting the property, up to the middle of last century, when, upon the death of another "third heir," who died prematurely of consumption, the Priory and estates attached to it passed into the hands of strangers.

"The Arundel Curse."

The Arundels had long played an important rôle in the history of Cornwall, and among the best of

¹ Vide *Picturesque England*, by L. Valentine, p. 329.

them was Sir John, who had not only acquired considerable fame as a soldier, but the reputation for being a very just and fearless magistrate. He lived at a place called Efford, on the north coast of Cornwall, near Stratton. Now, however just and impartial a magistrate may be, he cannot always please everyone, and Sir John, in his official capacity, gave great offence to a certain man, known locally as "the wild shepherd." This individual, by reason of his strange, uncouth appearance and alleged possession of supernatural powers, enjoyed a considerable popularity among the peasants, who regarded him as their most weighty champion, whenever they had any special grievance to air against the rich, as well as a healer and prophet, facts of which "the wild shepherd," no doubt, took every advantage.

Being malicious and revengeful he harboured an intense hatred of Sir John Arundel, for what he erroneously termed his harsh and unfair treatment of him, and he used to waylay him constantly for the purpose of heaping curses on him. On these occasions he would invariably repeat the lines,

"When upon the yellow sand,
Thou shalt die by human hand,"

and he recited them with such intensity, looking the while so weird and savage, that Sir John, who, despite his bravery on the field of battle, was as superstitious as most other people of his time, felt awed and frightened, and consequently removed with all his household from Efford-on-the-Sands to Trerice, where he lived for several years, immune from the shepherd's persecution. All this time Cornwall had enjoyed comparative peace, but in the tenth year of Edward

IV's reign, Richard de Vere, Earl of Oxford, suddenly marched through Cornwall at the head of a strong force and seized St. Michael's Mount.

Sir John was then Sheriff of the County, and feeling it was his bounden duty as a loyal subject of the King to expel the intruders, he at once collected together an army, composed of his own retainers and a number of volunteers, and attacked the Earl of Oxford.

The besieged held out stubbornly, defeating every attack that was made and continually making counter sorties. In one of these latter Sir John's army, that lay encamped on the sands of Marazion, was taken completely by surprise, and in the terrible struggle that ensued, Sir John was mortally wounded. As he lay dying on the sand, the wild shepherd suddenly appeared before him and, chuckling diabolically, repeated those much dreaded and never forgotten words :

“ When upon the yellow sand,
Thou shalt die by human hand.”

He then darted away before anyone could stop him, disappearing no one knew whither.

“A Leap and a Curse”

A very prominent family in Cornwall in the fourteenth and fifteen centuries were the Bodrigans of Looe. We read of Otto, or Otho de Bodrigan, as Lord of the Manor of Looe in the reign of Edward II, and of his namesake, who was Sheriff of Cornwall in the reign of Richard II, but, undoubtedly, the most distinguished of them all was Sir Henry Bodrigan, the hero of one of the most wonderful leaps on record, and the pronouncer of the famous Bodrigan curse.

According to Gilbert, the Cornish historian,¹ at that period in our history (i.e. the reign of Richard III), when the law of the strongest was the rule, three families in Cornwall were engaged in a series of domestic wars ; these were Bodrigan, Trevanion, and Edgecumbe. And when Richard III obtained sovereign power, on the division which then took place in the York faction, Bodrigan endeavoured to seize the property of Edgecumbe, with little respect, it would seem, for the life of the possessor ; but in the final struggle on Bosworth Field, where Henry Tudor put an entire end to this contest for power under the guise of property, by seizing the whole to himself, Sir Richard Edgecumbe and his grandson, Hugh Trevanion, had the good fortune to appear on the winning side. Directly after the battle, Sir Henry Bodrigan being attainted by Act of Parliament for treason, Edgecumbe and Trevanion, having collected together a strong force, set off at the head of it to attack him and recover their property. The two armies met on a waste piece of ground, near the Barton of Bodrigan,² called ever afterwards the Woeful Moor.

A tremendous struggle ensued, which ended in the rout of Sir Henry. Flying from the battlefield he made for the coast, and to the mute astonishment of all beholders took a leap over a precipice into the sea beneath, swimming to a ship that was in waiting for him a little distance from the shore. Tradition

¹ Vide Vol. III, p. 293.

² "The Barton of Bodrigan was looked upon as the best in Cornwall, containing between 500 and 600 acres, mostly very good land. On a part of this land was a chapel (mostly demolished when Tonkin made his history of the place) built by some of the Bodrigans. This chapel land or point is in the part of Bodrigan, and in this part was the house of Sir Henry Bodrigan" (see *Topographical and Historical Sketches of the Boroughs of East and West Looe*, by Thomas Bond).

asserts that when he was safely on deck he looked towards the shore, on which Edgcumbe and Trevanion were standing, and shaking his fist at them, he cursed them both, bequeathing his folly to the former and his extravagance to the latter. The ship bore him to Ireland, but what subsequently became of him is uncertain. Some say he died in Ireland, and others that he came over to England to help John, Earl of Lincoln, and was slain with him at the Battle of Stoke. Be this as it may, the greatness of his family ended with his flight from England, and the male line of the Bodrigans of Looe finished with him. He was beloved by the poor, on account of his great generosity, and so great was the faith they had in all he said and did that they were firmly convinced that the curse he had uttered would come true. Not a whit debarred by it, however, Sir Richard Edgcumbe seized Bodrigan and a portion of Sir Henry's other estates, while Hugh Trevanion appropriated the remainder, including Newham.

The Edgcumbes (the name is now spelt Edgcombe) were as old and well known a family as the Bodrigans, and their history is full of strange adventure and romance. There was a Richard Edgcumbe,¹ Lord of Edgcumbe, in Milton Abbot, as long ago as 1292, and we are told that on William de Edgcumbe marrying Helena, heiress of Cothele, in Cornwall, in the reign of Edward III, he moved thither, and that thenceforth, for several generations, Cothele² became the principal seat of the Edgcumbes.

¹ Direct ancestor of the present Earl.

² The present Cothele Hall, most probably erected on the site of another mansion, is called, on account of its antiquity and beauty, one of the gems of Cornwall. "It is an embattled building round a quadrangle, situated on the south-east slope of Kingston Down, and overlooking a mass of ancient woods of oak, elm, and chestnut that descend

The most interesting, perhaps, of all the early EdgECumbes was Richard EdgECumbe, grandson of the heiress of Cothele, who figured in the above recorded curse story. Owing to his hostility to Richard III, that monarch sent a strong body of soldiers to Cornwall, to bring him back with them to London, dead or alive. Hotly pursued by his foes, he hid himself in his own dense wood at Cothele. His retreat, however, was eventually discovered, probably through the treachery of one of his servants, and he awoke one moonlight night to see, through the bushes, the King's soldiers stealing stealthily towards him. He was instantly on his feet, but, unfortunately, his enemies caught sight of him, and with savage shouts at once rushed after him. A race for life ensued, and EdgECumbe would, doubtless, have been caught, but for a clever trick. Making for a deep pool of water he picked up a huge stone and hurled it into it, then dropping his cap on the ground, close to the water's edge, he hid himself amid a thick cluster of rushes. A few moments later the King's soldiers arrived on the scene.

Perceiving the cap on the ground and having heard the splash, they came to the conclusion—some think the supposition on their part was a mere pretence, as they really had a certain amount of sympathy for the fugitive—that he had either committed suicide in his despair of escape, or had tried to swim the pool and been drowned in the attempt.

to the very banks of the Tamer." Begun by Sir Richard EdgECumbe of Bosworth fame, and not completed till the reign of Elizabeth, it is regarded as one of the best existing specimens of mediæval architecture in England, vieing, in that respect, with Haddon Hall, in Derbyshire. Among the various Sovereigns who, from time to time, visited it, were Charles II, George III, Queen Charlotte, the Prince Consort, and Queen Victoria (see *Picturesque England*).

Anyhow, they abandoned the chase and left the wood.

Having escaped thus narrowly, Edgcumbe quitted England by stealth and joined the Earl of Richmond abroad. Subsequently, he fought for him on Bosworth Field, where, as a reward for his gallantry, he was knighted and awarded Totnes Castle and lordship. Despite the curse inflicted on him, he held many high offices, and died, quite naturally, at Morlaix, while acting as English Ambassador to France. His son, Piers, also won his knighthood on the field of battle (the Battle of the Spurs), and it was his son, Sir Richard, who built the present headquarters of the Edgcumbe family.¹ In 1748 the Edgcumbes, who were ever renowned for their lofty characters and great sense of duty, were created Barons, and in 1789 the additional title of Earl of Mount Edgcumbe was conferred on them. Both these titles are still in possession of the family, who, despite the old belief in the neighbourhood of Bodrigan that Sir Henry Bodrigan's curse "hath in some part its effect to this day," would seem to have been ever prosperous. Indeed, the only what one might term unpleasant incident in connection with the family, the only incident that in any way suggested the work of the curse, was the well known one associated with Lady Edgcumbe, mother of the first Baron Edgcumbe.

Taken with what was thought to be a sudden and mysterious malady and supposed to be dead as a result of it, she was buried within a week of her believed decease in the family vault. Now, it so happened that the sexton, who was a peculiarly mean and avaricious old man, had seen the body, how and

¹ *Topographical and Historical Sketches of Boroughs of East and West Looe*, by Thomas Bond.

when tradition does not say, and noticed a ring of great value glittering on one of the fingers. Resolved at once to get it, he stole down into the vault one night, opened the coffin, and tried to secure his prize. Try how he would, however, he could not remove it, and while he was pressing and pinching the delicate tapering finger on which it shone so tantalizingly, the body slowly opened its eyes and, looking at him fixedly, sat up in the coffin.

The effect on the sexton was electrical. Believing what he saw was a ghost he uttered a wild shriek of terror and turning on his heels he rushed out of the vault, never pausing for one instant till he reached his home. In the meanwhile, the supposed apparition, who, being in a trance, had been only too painfully conscious of all that had taken place, got out of the coffin and, picking up the lantern the sexton had dropped in his fright, found her way out of the vault and ran as fast as she could home. Arriving there she stood beneath her husband's window and called to him. Luckily he was awake—his grief at her supposed death was so great that he could not sleep—and realizing at once that some terrible blunder had been made, and that she was still alive, he sprang out of bed, intoxicated with joy, and running downstairs admitted her. Wonderful to relate, she quite got over her awful experience of being interred alive, and five years later gave birth to a son. What happened to the sexton tradition does not relate, but, perhaps, in his joy of recovering his wife, Baron Edgcumbe forgave him his attempted robbery.

Like their hereditary friends, the Edgcumbes, the Trevanions of Trevanion Park are an old and distinguished family, though no actual records of them would seem to exist prior to the reign of Edward II.

In the reign of Edward II, John Trevanion represented Lostwithiel in Parliament, while many Trevanions have served as Sheriffs of Cornwall.

The Hugh Trevanion who shared the property of Sir Henry Bodrigan with Sir Richard Edgecumbe does not seem to have been in any way affected by the curse. He married Elizabeth, daughter of Ludovici Pollard, and died, so far as one knows to the contrary, quite naturally, leaving several children, the eldest of whom inherited his property. All through the succeeding centuries the Trevanions¹ would seem to have been prosperous, their male folk repeatedly marrying heiresses and co-heiresses, thereby increasing the estates and adding largely to the family coffers. They constantly sent members to Parliament, and gained distinction, as of yore, on the field of battle. Hence, we have, in this instance, a famous curse that, apparently, failed in its working.

¹ Perhaps one of the most interesting events in connection with this family was the marriage, in 1748, of Sophia, youngest sister and co-heiress of William Trevanion, to Capt. Byron (afterwards Admiral Byron)—John, the eldest son of this union, being the father, by a second marriage, of Lord Byron, the poet. There are thus two curse traditions, albeit of very different characters, associated with the Trevanions.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SCULLION BOY'S CURSE

ONE of the most cruel and atrocious murders ever perpetrated, is that traditionally associated with Radcliffe Towers. One can see, perhaps, from the little that remains of it, for it is now a mere ruin, that Radcliffe Towers was once a manor-house of the first rank, and one gathers, from a study of certain records, that it was chiefly remarkable for its large hall, over forty feet long and twenty-six feet wide, with its magnificently timbered roof and oak framed windows, and for its curiously constructed old-world towers.

A licence "to kernel and embattle" proves that it was built in the fourth year of Henry IV's reign, and that its first owner was James Radcliffe, eldest son of William Radcliffe.

Referring to the tradition. The most popular version of it is that contained in a ballad written by Dr. Percy, who, probably, culled his material from an old black letter copy of another ballad in the Pepys collection called *The Lady Isabella's Tragedy, or a Stepmother's Cruelty*. Rendered in prose from these and other collated sources, the story of the terrible tragedy, said to have taken place at Radcliffe Towers, may be told thus :

About the middle of the fifteenth century, or, perhaps, rather later, Radcliffe Towers was tenanted by Sir William and Lady de Radcliffe. The latter,

Sir William's second wife, was a very beautiful and imperious woman, a good many years younger than her consort. Obviously of a very passionate and jealous disposition, Lady de Radcliffe would seem to have entertained, from the very first, the most violent antagonism towards Ellen, her husband's pretty fair-haired daughter by his first wife. Sir William was devoted to Ellen, and Ellen, equally devoted to him, was his constant companion, saving when he went hunting or upon some other expedition which he considered of too dangerous a nature for her to take part in. Lady de Radcliffe, therefore, knowing all this, and realizing, in consequence, that any attempt to poison her husband's mind against Ellen would be futile, set to work to devise some other means of doing the girl an injury. Not wishing, however, to do Ellen any bodily harm herself, that was far too risky, she looked around for a confederate, someone whom she could hire to do her will, or cajole into doing it, and then, if necessary, get rid of afterwards. Her shrewd watchful eyes soon discovered that the chief cook at the hall, for some reason or another, disliked Ellen, and cautious questioning of the other servants substantiating this belief, she decided to approach him. He was a corpulent, sensual looking man, and it did not take her very long, when once she took to studying him closely, to find out that he was very fond of women as well as wine. Some women, when once they make up their minds to do a thing, especially if that thing is something they have very much set their hearts on, will stick at nothing. Lady de Radcliffe was one of these women. It cannot be stated authoritatively what method she adopted in order to come to an understanding with the head cook, but, from the little we are told of her

character, one may not unreasonably suppose that being unscrupulous to the very core, she either played upon his weakness for women by covertly encouraging him to make advances to her—and taking into consideration the disparity in age between her husband and herself, and her hot, passionate nature, she may even have gone further—or she may simply have bribed him with money. Anyhow, no matter what means she employed, she won him over to her scheme, and the two worked in conjunction.

Then came the fatal day. Sir William was out hunting, and all the servants, with the exception of the head cook and a rather troublesome scullery boy, having been given a holiday, at the express desire of Lady de Radcliffe, there was no one saving Lady de Radcliffe and Ellen and the above-named two servants at home. Ellen, as usual, in fine weather, was out of doors, amusing herself with her various pets, when Lady de Radcliffe came up to her and asked her if she would very kindly go to the head cook and tell him to kill the milk white doe in the park for dinner. Maybe, Ellen demurred, partly because, being very fond of animals, she hated the idea of killing them, particularly those that she had watched grow up and often fed with her own hands, and partly because, for the reason I have already suggested, she couldn't bear the cook. Lady de Radcliffe persisted, however, and Ellen, not wishing to fall out with her autocratic stepmother, now that she had no fond, doting father near at hand to protect her, reluctantly obeyed.

The house must have seemed very quiet when she entered it. No servants about, and the great hall deserted, peopled only by silent, still shadows, called into existence by the bright sunbeams

that streamed through the oak framed mullioned windows.

Somewhat hesitatingly, no doubt, she crossed the polished oak floor of the hall and tripped down the stone flagged passage leading to the kitchen, her steps awakening echoes that sounded strangely loud and hollow amid the intense hush. Several times she paused, in half a mind to turn back, but the thought of how angry her stepmother would be urged her on, and trying to conceal her feelings, so that she might appear at her ease, she entered the large kitchen and approached the cook, who was standing by the fire with his back towards her. On addressing him by name, he turned round, and in insolent tones enquired what she wanted.

Stifling her indignation as best she could, and resolving to complain to her father about the man's behaviour, she gave him the message from Lady de Radcliffe, and was preparing to depart, when he called her back.

"Do you know which doe I'm going to kill?" he said, picking up a long glittering knife from the table and advancing towards her with a terrible leer. "You are the milk white doe that will feel this," and he ran his broad, fleshy, spatulate thumb over the sharp blade. "It's your stepmother's order."

"What do you mean?" Ellen gasped, her eyes fixed on the knife in awful fascination.

"Just this, my fine lady," the cook replied. "You've shown your scorn and contempt for me a bit too plainly. I may be only a cook, but I'm a human being like yourself, and I've a right to be treated as such; but whenever I've looked at you, those pretty lips of yours have curled with disdain and you've treated me like dirt. Now it's my turn.

You're going to tantalise me no longer," and grinning hideously, he stretched out a long muscular arm and seized hold of Ellen, who could neither move nor call out, being both speechless and rooted to the ground with terror.

Just then the scullion boy, attracted by the sound of voices, rushed into the kitchen and seeing the cook about to plunge his knife into the breast of the young mistress he adored, he caught hold of his arm and begged him to spare her life, offering his own life instead.

"It's no good your talking, a whippet like you," the cook said, "I've got my orders from Lady de Radcliffe, and I'm going to kill her and make her into a pie for her father's dinner. He will eat her nice white flesh and think it is the most tender piece of doe he has ever tasted. Ha! ha! ha!" And throwing back his head, the cook laughed long and loud, never, however, relinquishing his hold of Ellen, who, now regaining her faculties to some extent, began to struggle desperately, shrieking for help at the top of her voice.

"Damn you, stop that," the cook exclaimed, with a horrible oath. "If you screech like that, it will be all the worse for you. There's one thing, there's no one to hear you. As for you," he went on, thrusting the scullion boy aside, "you mind your own business. If you breathe a word of what you see me do, I'll kill you, too."

The scullion boy, however, continued to fight desperately on Ellen's behalf till he was felled to the ground with a blow on the head that half stunned him.

In this semi-dazed condition he was compelled, like one in a dream, to witness, in all its horrible and

revolting details, the ghastly scene that followed. When it was all over, and the pie, composed of a portion of the fair Ellen, was placed in the oven, the cook compelled the youth, who had now practically recovered from the effects of the blow, to help him bury the remains of the unfortunate girl and remove all traces of the crime.

The following day Sir William returned from the chase and, tired and hungry, at once asked for his dinner.

It was served, as usual, in the great hall of the house, and among the various delicacies comprising it, was the large pie made the preceding day.

"Where's Ellen?" Sir William enquired, as he took his place at the head of the table, and glanced eagerly about him for a sight of his beloved daughter.

"I hardly know how to tell you," Lady de Radcliffe exclaimed, in very agitated tones, "but," and she went on to inform Sir William that directly he had started off on his hunting expedition, the previous morning, Ellen had announced her intention of going off, too, as she had decided to become a nun.

"She confided in me," Lady de Radcliffe observed, "that she had always had a longing to go into a convent, but had never been able to summon up the courage to tell you. I tried my very hardest, but I could not dissuade her, and she would not even tell me where she was going, lest I should tell you, and you would fetch her back."

"It's incredulous," Sir William ejaculated, thumping the table with his fist. "I simply can't and won't believe it."

"It's the truth," Lady de Radcliffe remarked, and she was about to continue, when a sudden noise

and commotion outside, in the passage leading from the hall to the kitchen, caused her to stop and look round.

The next moment the scullion boy burst into the hall, having evidently escaped, after a violent struggle, from those who would have held him back, and rushing up to Sir William informed him of the terrible scene he had witnessed in the kitchen.

"And for the love of God, sir," he added, "don't touch any of that pie," and he indicated the pie that Sir William had been about to cut when he sat down to table. The scullion boy then pronounced his curse upon the cook. Apparently, he did not include the instigator of the crime, Lady de Radcliffe, in his anathema, and one imagines that the omission could only have been due to one thing, namely, that he did not realize Lady de Radcliffe's guilt, being totally unable to understand how anyone occupying the exalted position she did could be in league with her cook, or responsible for the atrocious murder committed by him.

The effect of the scullion boy's confession and curse on everyone present was prodigious. Indeed, it could not have been greater had the roof fallen in on them, or an earthquake threatened to swallow them all up. Lady de Radcliffe, of course, pooh-poohed his statement, declaring that he was subject to hysteria, but his earnestness impressed Sir William to such an extent, that he ordered the chief cook to be apprehended at once and brought before him. We are unable to ascertain from the tradition whether he confessed there and then, or whether as those were the days of the rack and thumbscrew, it was under the application of these tortures that he not only admitted his own guilt, but implicated Lady de

Radcliffe. Anyhow, they were both tried for murder and condemned to death.

Lady de Radcliffe was burned at the stake, while her accomplice was thrust into a cauldron full of boiling lead. A cruel, but, maybe, none too cruel ending for such callous wretches.

The scullion boy, on the other hand, Sir William apparently adopted and made heir to his estates. This, in plain, prosaic language, is the well-known tradition of Fair Ellen of Radcliffe Towers.

If we turn for confirmation to the records and genealogy of the de Radcliffes of Radcliffe Towers, we may search for it in vain, for there is no indication there of any daughter of the house ever having come to an unnatural end, and the last owner of the property, Richard de Radcliffe, who happened to have daughters and no son, settled the estate not on a scullion boy, but on one Radcliffe, Baron Fitzwalter, who was probably a relative or a connection.

Yet, despite this absence of corroboration in the annals of the de Radcliffe family, and despite the apparent improbability of the story as a whole, it is quite conceivable there is some truth underlying it, and that it is not all due to the inventive genius of some wandering bard. Stepmothers, even in our own times, have occasionally been guilty of some very horrible acts of cruelty, and in the wild and savage days in which the events recorded here are said to have happened, there was, of course, much more scope and opportunity for the committal of atrocious and undetected crimes.

Anyhow, it is not very many years ago since visitors to the Radcliffe Towers were shown "blood-stains" on the floor on which Fair Ellen is alleged to



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have been done to death, and told that the ruins were haunted by the phantasm of a big black dog, believed to be the spirit of the wicked cook, still earthbound through the curse pronounced on him by the scullion boy.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PURITAN'S CURSE

THE ruins of Moreton-Corbet Hall, the ancient seat of the Corbet family, are situated in a parish of the same name, about eight miles to the north of Shrewsbury.

The hall, the actual building of which was begun by Sir Richard Corbet about the commencement of the seventeenth century, was erected on the site of a very ancient mansion that originally belonged to the Turols or Turets. The Turols were among the few Saxon landowners in Shropshire that were allowed to retain their estates after the Norman Conquest, and at the time of Domesday they are recorded to have owned thirteen mansions, including the one referred to, which was known at first as Moreton Hall, then Moreton Turet, and lastly, on the marriage of Joan, daughter and heiress of Bartholomew Turet, to Sir Richard Corbet, as Moreton-Corbet. This marriage took place in the reign of Henry III. Nothing of particular interest occurred, however, in connection with this old house, and it was not until it had been pulled down, and the new house was begun to be constructed on its site, that the sensational incidents that form the subject-matter of this chapter occurred.

The building of the hall was commenced, as I have already stated, by Sir Robert¹ Corbet, and, on his

¹ Styled in some accounts of the curse, Sir Richard.

death, it was continued by his brother, Sir Vincent, who inherited his estates. Now, at this time, the Puritans were very unpopular with the Government. Had they confined themselves to propounding the ethics of their creed, it is quite possible but little notice would have been taken of them, as James I, if not exactly tolerant, was certainly very indolent ; but they would mix politics with the religion they preached, and being extremely democratic they soon became an object of dread and aversion to the King and his Ministers, who determined to crush them. But for their unpopularity with the masses, this would not have been an easy thing to do ; they were, however, far too fanatical and opposed to any kind of pleasure to have many friends, and the public, instead of trying to shield them from the Government, aided the latter in persecuting them.

Now, among the few people of position in Shropshire who did not adopt a hostile attitude towards them was Sir Vincent Corbet. He was much broader minded and more lenient than the majority of people at that time, and instead of joining in the general persecution of the Puritans, he did his best to befriend and assist them.

Among those to whom he was especially kind was an old man named Paul Holmyard, who lived in a cottage near the hall. Paul was a typical Puritan of that age. Possessed of rather a striking appearance, he would probably have been deemed good looking by most people, but for the hardness of his mouth and the cold, unsympathetic expression in his eyes. He denounced any form of amusement, and was most abusive in his language towards the King and his Ministers, for encouraging gaiety and what he considered the non-observance of the Sabbath. Indeed,

he spoke with such little restraint and showed such open hostility to the Government, whom he further accused of encouraging Popery among the clergy, that Sir Vincent Corbet, who had often advised him to be more moderate and circumspect, was at last obliged, in self-defence, to threaten he would withdraw his protection from him. This did not, however, deter Paul. He did not believe, for one instant, that Sir Vincent Corbet would carry out his threat, and continued the attacks on the King, the Church, and Government with even greater bitterness than before.

Then came a night which he was destined never to forget. It was in the winter, and he had retired to bed rather earlier than usual, when a loud knock at the front door made him get out of bed and peer out of the window.

Below, in the moonlight, stood a man, whom he recognized as one of his followers, named Jonathan.

"Hulloa, Brother Jonathan," he called out, opening the window. "What dost thou want with me at this hour?"

"I have come to warn you the Officers of the Law are on their way here to apprehend you," Jonathan replied.

"Are you sure?" Paul exclaimed. "Are you quite sure?"

"Aye, that I am," Jonathan said, "and unless you bestir yourself quickly they will have you."

"But where shall I go?" Paul remarked; "to the hills?"

"Impossible," Jonathan responded, "they would track you from your footmarks upon the snow, which lies thick and untrodden for miles around. You'd be caught long before you reached the hills."

"Where, then, shall I go?" Paul asked tremu-

lously. "Advise me, Brother Jonathan, for thou art well known for a burning and stirring light amongst the Gentiles. Tell me, as thou lovest the Lord, how I may best escape the snare of the fowler, who else will, peradventure, take and slay me."

"There's only one avenue of escape open to you, friend," Jonathan replied, stamping his feet on the ground, to restore the circulation, for it was bitterly cold; "and that's one you may not like to try."

"I'll try anything rather than be taken by those sons of Belial," Paul answered. "What is it?"

"The ruins of the old chapel," Jonathan whispered. "Nobody will like to follow you there; and if they should venture to do so, the passages below are so many and intricate, they might search for a whole year and never find you."

"I will go there," Paul said, "and now think of thine own safety, Brother Jonathan, and flee, lest those hell hounds get on thy track, too."

He then closed the window and at once made preparations for his flight.

The ruins wherein Jonathan had advised Paul to hide bore a very sinister reputation. All sorts of rumours with regard to them were in circulation.

It was said, for instance, that no one who had ever ventured to penetrate the passages underneath them had ever been known to come out. Some suggested that having got there, they had been unable to find their way out, and had starved to death, while others believed they had been tempted to suicide by the evil spirits, popularly supposed to haunt the place. Indeed, it was largely on account of these evil spirits that few cared to venture near the ruins, even in the daytime. Paul Holmyard by no means discredited

the stories told of them, but realizing his only chance of escape lay in concealing himself in their subterranean labyrinths, he decided to hie thither with as much haste as possible. The little time afforded him for preparations, accounts, no doubt, for the inadequate supply of articles he took with him. They amounted only to a tinder box, one wax candle, and a few eatables. These he crammed into the pockets of his overcoat. Running as fast as he could, he speedily arrived at the ruins, which were absolutely deserted, and ensconcing himself within them, he watched for his enemies. They very shortly appeared, a party of men, some on foot and some on horseback, armed with pikes, swords, and muskets. Following his track across the snow-covered fields, they rushed towards the ruins with exultant cries, brandishing their weapons ferociously as they came.

Dreading the underground passages as much as anybody, and, perhaps, more than anybody, Paul waited till his enemies were within a few yards of him before he ventured down the long flight of slippery stone steps leading to the said labyrinths. He did so not a moment too soon, for his enemies, having espied his white face peeping through the cracks of the walls, rushed with triumphant shouts into the tumble-down building, and were not long in discovering whither he had vanished. It was fortunate for him that the steps were slippery. His pursuers, being encumbered with armour and weapons, had to descend slowly, and, but for this, they would soon have caught him ; as it was, they were close at his heels when he arrived at the bottom of the staircase and plunged frantically into the passage directly ahead of him.

Trusting to Providence for guidance, as he had

blown out his light for fear of being seen, he rushed blindly forward in the darkness, his enemies still in hot pursuit. He made frantic efforts to keep ahead of them, but they rapidly gained on him, and when the light from their lanterns suddenly shone on him and one of them fired, in his terror, he slipped, and the next moment found himself rolling down a steep slope, down, down, down, into what seemed the very bowels of the earth. At last, just when he had begun to think he was doomed to go on thus for ever, something barred the way, and he came to a stop. For some minutes he was too shaken and bruised to move even a limb. He could hear, however, voices far above him, and he concluded his enemies were wondering what had happened to him. Presently the voices ceased, and he was then conscious of a low murmuring sound proceeding from somewhere beneath where he was lying. Very cautiously he lighted his candle and looked around him. To his horror and amazement, he was on the brink of an awful chasm, at the bottom of which rushed a river, and he had only been saved from falling into it by a ridge of rock a few inches high. Terrified at the bare idea of such a hideous fate, for to him there was something indescribably horrible about black, swiftly flowing water, he quickly turned his back on it, and clambering up the slope into the passage again, continued straight ahead. He had not gone far, however, before he again heard his pursuers, presumably returning, after a fruitless search for him, and, in order to avoid them, he darted down a passage running at right angles to the one he was in. In his fall, apparently, he had lost his tinder box, and thus he found himself in a new and terrible predicament.

He was in pitch darkness, in that labyrinth of passages, with death in varied degrees of frightfulness facing him on all sides. To add to the horror of the situation, his supply of food was extremely limited, and he was beginning to feel both hungry and thirsty.

He must either find his way out or starve. Groping his way along, terrified lest a sudden slip should precipitate him into some frightful abyss, he wandered on and on, till his wearied limbs at last refused to carry him any further, and he sank utterly exhausted to the ground.

After a rest of some hours he got up again, and renewed his endeavours to find a way out of the labyrinth. In this manner, wandering on till his strength gave out, and then resting and sleeping till he had sufficiently recovered to go on again, he spent, what seemed to him, days underground. Indeed, he was at last beginning to despair of ever finding his way into the open again, when he suddenly heard the sound of flowing water and saw a faint light far ahead of him. Advancing very cautiously towards the light, which steadily increased in size the nearer he got to it, he at length found himself, to his unutterable joy, in the open air. After falling on his knees and thanking God for deliverance from an awful ending, he aimed for a cottage he saw in the distance, and discovered, to his delight, it belonged to a follower of his, a poor peasant. The peasant, who was overjoyed at seeing him, at once offered him food and shelter and listened with the greatest sympathy to his tale of suffering. He had been in the labyrinth just three days. For some extraordinary reason, he seems to have held Sir Vincent Corbet responsible for all that he had undergone, and to have become inflamed

with a passion for revenge on him. No sooner, therefore, had he regained his health and strength than he set out to find his former friend and benefactor, and eventually alighted on him, superintending the building of Moreton-Corbet Hall.

Going up to him and assuming the tone and action of some prophet in biblical days, he raised one hand to heaven and exclaimed :¹

“Woe unto thee, man of the hardened heart, hardened as the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, to thine own destruction. Rejoice not in thy wealth ; nor in the halls of thy pride ; for never shall a copestone be set upon them. Neither shall thou, nor thy children, nor thy children’s children, dwell therein, but they shall be a ruin and a desolation ; and the snake, and the eft, and the adder shall be found there ; and thy house shall be full of doleful creatures.”

Having uttered these words, he apparently turned round and walked away, without giving Sir Vincent Corbet an opportunity to reply. What subsequently became of him tradition does not say. Though his curse resembled in spirit most other curses and prophecies, it is quite possible it was not uttered on the spur of the moment, but was well thought over beforehand. His prognostication certainly carried some show of probability with it, and it is not at all unlikely that the cunning Puritan may have thought Mr. Corbet would incur, as Sir Bernard Burke suggests, “the fate of those who plan first and count the cost afterwards.” Tradition does not inform us whether the house was ever completed according to the original plans, but it suffered considerable damage in 1648, when it was garrisoned by Parliamentary

¹ Vide *Family Romance*, by Sir J. B. Burke, Vol. 2.

troops and besieged by Royalists. After that time it was never inhabited and gradually fell into ruins,¹ the abode only of owls, bats, and other doleful creatures.

¹ The ruins, still very extensive and, of course, much overgrown with ivy and lichens, are yet to be seen and present one of the most picturesque objects in the county.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE KEITH CURSES

FEW families, at one time, held more important posts or occupied more territory in Scotland than did the Keiths of Dunnottar and Inverugie. For five centuries they played a prominent rôle in all public events, political and ecclesiastical, and won distinction on the field of battle, besides winning renown as diplomatists and patrons of learning.

Their origin is uncertain, but they are generally believed to have derived it from Baron Herveius,¹ who was among those emigrants of various nationalities, Norman, Saxon, Flemish, and Scandinavian, who settled in Scotland during the reign of David I and were granted land by that monarch; he, Baron Herveius, receiving a district in East Lothian, which he named Keith Hervei. His son, Herveius de Keith, held the office of King's Marischal under Malcolm IV and William I of Scotland, and for many generations that office became hereditary in the family, the Keith Hervei Estate being renamed Keith Marischal.

The Keiths are remarkable for many things, but for one thing in particular—although great feudal lords and loyal to their kings, they were ever upholders of liberty, civil as well as religious. We find, for example, Sir Robert de Keith, direct in descent from Baron Herveius, fighting with great gallantry

¹ Vide *Great Historic Families of Scotland*, by James Taylor.

for Robert Bruce, first of all against Comyn and then against the English. He led the charge of cavalry that routed the English archers at Bannockburn, immortalized in *The Lord of the Isles*, and received from Bruce, in acknowledgment of the part he played in the great Scottish victory, a coat of arms with the motto "Veritas Vincet," and a charter of the lands of Keith Marischal and of the office of Great Marischal of Scotland to himself and next heirs male, bearing the name and arms of Keith. His death was due to the negligence and stupidity of the Earl of Mar. The Earl of Mar, who was in command of a Scottish army, allowed an English force to surprise him at Dupplin, on August 12, 1332, with the result that the Scots were cut to pieces, among the slaughtered being Sir Robert de Keith, Earl Marischal of Scotland.

Sir Robert's descendants greatly increased the Keith estates by alliances with other wealthy and distinguished Scottish families. Through his marriage with the only child and heiress of Sir John Fraser, Sir William de Keith, obtained large estates in Kincardine; and it was in his time that the first of the Keith curses is supposed to have been incurred. Sir William de Keith exchanged with William de Lindsay of Byres certain lands in Fyfe and Stirling for part of the estate of Dunnottar, in Kincardineshire. Now, on this estate, jutting into the sea, was a great rock, on the top of which was an ancient church and churchyard, and the moment Sir William saw this rock, he thought what an ideal site it would make for a castle, since the only approach to it from the mainland was a narrow precipitous path that wound its way along the brink of a terrible chasm. He accordingly pulled the church down and did away

with the burial ground, building another church for the people of the parish in a more get-at-able spot.

He then erected a castle of colossal strength, which he named Dunnottar Castle, on the site of the church he had pulled down. Unfortunately, however, the Bishop of St. Andrews, in whose diocese Dunnottar happened to be, regarded the destruction of the church and burial ground on the rock as an act of the grossest sacrilege, and excommunicated Sir William. Then, Sir William appealed to Pope Benedict XIII, stating all the circumstances of the case, to wit, his urgent need of a castle to protect his estates and the fact that he had built another church in the place of the one he had pulled down; and the Pope, taking his part, ordered the angry bishop to remove the excommunication, on Sir William's payment of a small sum a year for the use and retention of the castle.

Thus the quarrel was settled, but the superstitious country folk shook their heads ominously. The original church, like all ecclesiastical property in ancient times, had been protected by a curse, and they believed Sir William, in destroying the church, would suffer the doom the curse entailed. They did not think that the Pope, even, could protect him from it, and their belief was confirmed when John, Sir William's eldest son was killed at the battle of Otterburn.

The prosperity of the family far from waning, however, increased under Sir William's second son, Robert, who succeeded to the estates in the place of his brother, and was raised to the peerage as Earl Marischal. His immediate successors did nothing of any particular note, but the fourth Earl Marischal raised the family to a greater state of opulence and power than it had ever experienced before, a circumstance which, it would seem, entirely negated the

theory of the Keiths being cursed. Indeed, no Keith had ever stood in more favour with the King than this Earl Marischal. He accompanied James V to France in 1530, in order to advise that King in his selection of a bride, and when James died, he was one of the six appointed to take charge of the infant Princess. He fought with great gallantry at Pinkie, and was the first Keith to manifest any sympathy with the reformed faith, openly declaring himself in favour of Protestantism in an address to the "Estates," on the ratification of the Confession of Faith by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, July 17, 1560.¹

After the murder of Darnley, which seemed to have a great effect on him, he retired to Dunnottar Castle and became such a recluse there, that he was styled "William of the Tower." It was then, while he was there, that Thomas the Rhymer is alleged to have visited Dunnottar, and standing on a stone facing the castle to have uttered another of his famous prophetic anathemas, part of which runs thus :

"As long as this stane stands on this craft,
The name of Keith shall be alaft ;
But when this stane begins to fa',
The name of Keith shall wear awa'."²

It must be reckoned a score to Thomas the Rhymer that this prophecy was literally fulfilled. The stone on which he uttered it was removed in 1763, and three years later the last Earl Marischal sold the remnant of the Keith Marischal estates, including Dunnottar. Following close on the heels of Thomas the Rhymer's prophetic curse came what was popularly supposed to be a third curse, which was incurred thus :

In a sheltered hollow on the banks of the little

¹ Calderwood's *History*, Vol. II, p. 37.

² Vide *Twelve Sketches of Scenery and Antiquities*, by Mr. Ferguson.

river Ugie was a Cistercian Abbey, known as Deer. The last Abbot of Deer was a Keith, namely, Robert, the younger son of the third Earl Marischal.

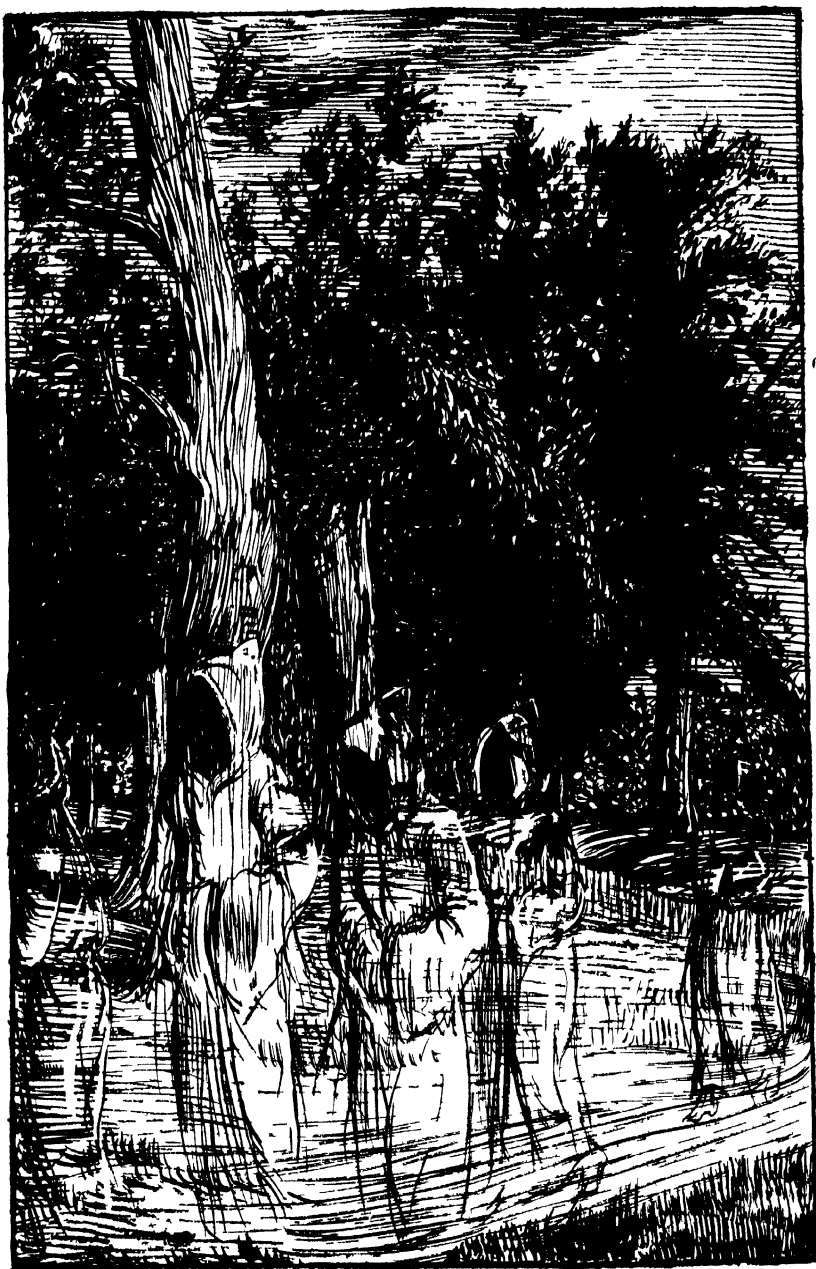
His nephew, i.e. the second son of the fourth Earl Marischal, known in history as the Commendator of Deer, "obtained the Erection of the Abbey and Abbey lands into a temporal ladyship, July 29, 1587, to be callit in all tyme cuming the ladyship of Altrie."

On his death his title and estates went to George, the fifth and, perhaps, best known of all the Earl Marischals. Trouble at once ensued. George's younger brother, Robert Keith of Benholm, thinking George had quite enough property already without wanting any more, and having long coveted Deer, tried to seize the Abbey by force. George, however, not only succeeded in expelling him from it, but besieged him in his own castle of Fedderat and compelled him to surrender. Any other but a Keith might have taken summary vengeance on a person who had caused such trouble, but the Keiths were ever moderate, and George, instead of punishing Robert, magnanimously forgave him, and the quarrel then and there ended. Now, Earl George married twice, and his first wife, who was the daughter of Lord Holme, and both religious and superstitious, tried to dissuade him from meddling, in any way, with the Abbey of Deer and the lands attached to it, reminding him that, like all ancient ecclesiastical property, they were protected by some such curse as, "Cursed be them that taketh this away from the holy use, whereunto it is now dedicat,"¹ and declaring that she had had the following vision.

¹ According to Patrick Gordon of Ruthven, in his *Short Abridgement of Britane's Distemper from the yeares of God 1639 to 1649*, this would seem to have been the actual curse.

Falling into a deep sleep one night, she suddenly found herself looking out of one of the windows of the castle—they were then staying at Dunnottar—upon the narrow winding path below. Overhead a great silvery moon shone in a cloudless sky, illuminating the whole landscape with its cold white beams. The great chasm and moonlit beach at its base, stood out with remarkable distinction, and there was a something so awe-inspiring and eerie in the scene, something so strangely different from anything she had ever been conscious of before, that she was both fascinated and frightened. She was inwardly commenting on the blackness of the many shadows from the rocks, their fantastic shapes, and the extraordinary stillness of the hour, when she gave a violent start, her alarm being caused by the sudden appearance of a monk round a bend in the winding pathway. He was followed immediately by another monk, whilst another and yet another followed close on his heels, until a whole party of them had appeared, all following in the rear of the first, and making their way, silently and stealthily, towards the castle. Fearful of being seen by them, but anxious to discover what brought them there, she concealed herself behind the window curtains and watched.

When they arrived at the castle they halted, and then, to her amazement, took out penknives from under their habiliments and began to cut and hack away at the walls of the castle with them. The idea of their thinking they could destroy the castle thus struck her as so ludicrous that she ran to tell her husband and ask him to come and look at them. She then, with that abruptness so characteristic of dreams, found herself suddenly standing with her husband, some little distance from the Craig of



Yete Campbell

THE KEITH CURSES

Dunnottar, gazing at a mass of ruins on it, which was all that was left of their once proud castle. Its contents, consisting of costly and magnificent furniture and priceless collections of curios, were scattered about on the surface of the moon-kissed sea, floating on the waves, as they rose and fell, like the merest drift-wood. Not a vestige of the monks could be seen anywhere, but a strange voice, coming apparently from close beside them, whispered, with startling significance, in their ears: "Cursed be those that taketh this away from the holy use," and was presumably about to continue, when the sleeper awoke.

Being a very practical and matter-of-fact Protestant, Earl George only laughed at her and carried out at Deer all those alterations he had already planned. Moreover, to show his contempt for vulgar superstition, as he termed it, he caused the following inscription to be affixed to several of the houses he had built, including the Marischal College, Aberdeen, which he founded and endowed in 1593 :

" They say
Quhat say they,
They haif say,
Let thame say."

In 1836, when the old Marischal College was pulled down, the inscription was preserved and affixed to the present structure, which was erected in the place of the old one. Many of those who read the inscription at the time they were written said it was a foolish thing to mock at curses. And before many years had passed it did, indeed, seem that the luck of the Keiths of Dunnottar was departing from them and that their prosperity was on the wane. George, fifth Earl Marischal, was succeeded by his son, William, who left four sons, two of them succeeding to the title and

estates in succession. Of these the seventh Earl played a prominent but curious part in the Covenanters' War and Great Civil War. He was a staunch Covenanter and yet at heart a Royalist.

True to the Keith tradition as upholders of civil and religious liberty, he opposed the attempt of Charles I and Laud to force the Episcopal Prayer Book on the people of Scotland, and took part in several engagements against their forces led by Montrose. Later on, however, he signed the Cumbernauld Bond of 1641 in favour of upholding regal authority against the extreme section of the Covenanters led by the Duke of Argyll. This brought about a reconciliation between him and Montrose, which, however, was only temporary, for very soon the two were again fighting one another.

In revenge for his failure to seize Dunnottar Castle, which Earl Marischal stoutly defended, Montrose laid waste all the adjoining land belonging to the Keith estates, even destroying the boats of the poor Dunnottar fishermen, an act which confirmed many people in their belief that the various prophetic curses incurred by the Keiths of Dunnottar were being worked out. Despite this harsh treatment from the Royalists, the 7th Earl Marischal subsequently tried to save Charles I from falling into the hands of the Republicans, and throwing in his lot with the King, was captured, together with other Cavalier officers, at the rout of Preston.

However, after being a prisoner for some years in the Tower of London, he was liberated, he it to Cromwell's credit, and at the Restoration he became a Member of the Privy Council and was appointed Keeper of the Great Seal. He died peacefully enough in 1661.

The Keiths had thus, although, mainly owing to the degradations of war, their property had depreciated in value, retained their glory and prestige.

With regard to their financial losses, William Keith, 9th Earl Marischal, made matters so much worse by his extravagance that, when his son, George, succeeded him, he only inherited, of all the once vast territory of the Keiths, Dunnottar, Fetteresso, and Inverugie. This George, the 10th Earl Marischal, stands out as one of the most conspicuous of all the Keiths. Though loyal to the Hanoverian cause, when George I ascended the throne, he was deprived by the Government of his command of a Scottish troop of Horse Grenadier Guards. Consequently, he felt very embittered against the English Government, and yielding to the persuasion of his mother, who was a Roman Catholic and Jacobite, he joined his cousin, the Earl of Mar, in the 1715 Insurrection, on behalf of the Old Pretender.

On landing in Scotland, in 1715, the Old Pretender (styled by the Jacobites James VII) stayed for a day or two at Fetteresso; and, as a consequence of participating in this Rebellion, the 10th Earl Marischal lost practically everything, his titles and the hereditary office of Grand Marischal, which had been held by the Keiths for nearly four hundred years, being now attainted, while all his estates were forfeited.

After taking part in a landing, in 1719, in the Western Highlands, which proved thoroughly unsuccessful, he fled to Spain. Thence, he went, for awhile, to France, and thence, again, to Prussia, where he found great favour with Frederick the Great.

Indeed, it was partly due to that Sovereign's intervention on his behalf, and partly to some service

he was able to render the English Government, while he was acting as Prussian Ambassador in Spain, that he was able, not only to revisit Scotland, but to purchase back a portion of the old Keith estates, including Dunnottar. It is said that the sight of the castle on the Craig, dismantled and sadly dilapidated, affected him deeply, and that it was partly due to this, and partly to his finding most of the friends of his youth dead and gone away, that he decided to return to Prussia. Before doing so, however, he sold Dunnottar, and the old castle and adjoining estate thus passed out of the Keith family for ever.

The sale took place in 1766, three years after the stone, on which the Rhymer is alleged to have stood, when he gave utterance to his famous prophecy, as already stated, was removed. With this last proof of his prophetic power fresh in their minds, people who took an interest in Thomas of Ercildoune's sayings, and also in the curse traditionally associated with the Deer lands, now went about with long faces, expressing their views in words of the old rhyme, thus :

“ Meddle nae wi' holy things,
For 'gin ye dee (do)
A weird Trede in some shape
Should follow thee.”

A warning which would certainly seem to have been curiously appropriate in the case of the Dunnottar Keiths.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CURSE OF THE M'ALISTERS

THE M'Alister curse dates back to the days of M'Alister Moore, Chieftain of a branch of the famous M'Alister Clan. The M'Alisters in question, like most of the Highland families of that period, were constantly engaged in feuds with their neighbours, and a party of them set out one evening to raid the cattle belonging to a widow who lived at a distance of some miles from M'Alister Moore's castle.

After a somewhat wearisome march over a wild and rugged tract of country, they came to the glen where the widow lived. Luck favoured them. The two stalwart sons of the widow, together with nearly all the farm hands and other dependents, happened to be away at the time, and there was no one, in consequence, to offer them any opposition. The widow implored them to leave her a few cattle, but her entreaties were in vain, they searched every corner of the glen and secured every beast they could find.

When the widow's sons returned and heard what had happened, they were naturally highly incensed. Collecting together all their friends and retainers they at once attacked the M'Alisters, who, unluckily for them, were greatly weakened by the absence of M'Alister Moore and a large number of their best fighting men, and recovered the stolen cattle. But

the affair did not end there. Directly M'Alister Moore came home and heard of the attack on his clan by the widow's sons, he cursed their impudence, and vowing to take summary revenge on them, he collected a large force together and at once set out, at the head of it, to the glen. Taken by surprise, the widow's sons, who were practically alone on the farm at the time, were soon overcome and taken prisoners.

Now, M'Alister Moore always took with him, wherever he went, twenty-four picked bowmen, who, in addition to forming his bodyguard in battle, held, whenever they were called upon to do so, summary courts of arbitration, performing all the functions connected therewith themselves, that is to say, acting not merely as judges but also as jurymen and executioners. At M'Alister Moore's bidding, they now tried the two helpless prisoners and sentenced them to death. The farm-house stood at the base of a great black rock. In front of it was a strip of green sward, bordering a swift-flowing stream, that rose in the surrounding mountains, and it was on this green and within a few feet of this cool pellucid stream that the bowmen now erected a gibbet. According to custom, they waited till the sun, which had been shining gloriously all the day, had sunk low in the horizon, before bringing their grisly task to a conclusion. It was in vain the widow fell on her knees before M'Alister Moore and pleaded for her sons' lives. M'Alister merely thrust her aside with an oath and bade the executioners begin.

While the bowmen were hanging the unfortunate youths, the widow remained silent. Crouching on the ground, close beside the gibbet, her eyes fixed on the fast disappearing sun, she neither uttered a sound nor moved a limb, but the moment her sons had ceased

to struggle, and while their bodies were even yet warm, she suddenly sprang up, and advancing towards M'Alister Moore, who was preparing to depart, she glared at him and, brushing back the straggling grey locks from her forehead, addressed him thus :

"Shame, shame on you, M'Alister, you have slain them that took but their own ; you have slain them you had injured. You have murdered the fatherless and spoiled the widow. But He that is righteous shall come between us and the curse of God shall cling to thee and thine for ever. The sun rose on me to-day, the proud mother of two handsome boys ; it now sets on their stiffening bodies."

As she spoke, she raised her arm and pointed fiercely at the two bodies dangling on the gibbet. Their shadows stood out with startling distinctness on the sunlit sward beneath them, while over their heads, glancing down down at their pale upturned faces, hovered a crow, anticipating, with apparent satisfaction, a speedy gorge. Several of the bowmen, noticing this, nudged one another and grinned, the rest remained with eyes fixed on the widow in awe-struck silence. Continuing her curse, the widow, her eyes blazing with almost superhuman fury, turned again to M'Alister.

"I suffer now," she said, "but you shall suffer always. You have made me childless, but you and yours shall be heirless for ever. Long may their name last, and wide may their lands be, but never, while the name and lands continue, shall there be born a son to the house of M'Alister."

As she ended, M'Alister, who had stood looking at her and the bodies of her two sons with a malicious grin on his sunburned freckled face, burst into a

contemptuous laugh, and bidding her now address her conversation to her two "handsome sons," for he had neither the time nor patience to listen to such foolish prattle, he marched back to his castle, accompanied by all his followers.

The widow stood on the green gazing after him, till the last one disappeared from view, and then throwing herself on the ground, under the feet of her two lifeless boys, she gave way, for the first time, to a flood of tears, moaning like a sick person in her agony of grief. Although tradition does not say what subsequently became of the poor widow, her curse, it affirms, took effect.

M'Alister Moore continued to prosper, but somehow he never seemed happy. He had always been very bad tempered, but after the murder of the widow's two sons, he was sullen and morose, and his temper became infinitely worse. He continually cursed and swore at his followers, of whom none could do anything to please him. There is no record relative to the manner of his death, so that whether he died in his bed, or, what certainly seems very much more probable, was killed in a skirmish with some neighbouring clan, remains a matter of surmise, but it is definitely stated that he left no male issue—his sons, apparently, and in accordance with the curse, having predeceased him—M'Alister Castle and the estates belonging to it, thus passed, presumably, to whomsoever was his next of kin. And for many years the same thing occurred in every generation of this branch of the M'Alisters. The laird had no son, and the estates passed out of the direct line.

In Queen Anne's reign, however, the laird of M'Alister Castle, in addition to several daughters, at last had a son, and his parents, mindful of the curse,

saw that the very greatest care was taken of him. A bonny child and sound in every respect, there seemed to be no reason why he should not live to inherit the estates after them; and as year after year passed and he grew up, like other young men, hale and hearty, they began to regard the realization of their hopes in the light of a certainty. His engagement to the pretty daughter of a wealthy and powerful neighbouring laird greatly added to his parents' joy, and their hearts were now full to overflowing. He would have children, one of whom would, doubtless, be a boy, and thus the ownership of the M'Alister Castle would at last go on in a direct male line.

According to the custom of those times, they sent him for a year or two to the Continent, where, by mixing with the most fashionable people in Paris and Berlin, and attendances at Court, he would acquire polish, and at the same time, perhaps, something even more substantial than mere worldly wisdom. Now, all might have gone well and the fondest hopes of the M'Alisters have been realized, had not James Stuart, son of James II, popularly known as the Old Pretender, happened to be living just then in France. Now, the Old Pretender was a very wily individual. Possessed of a fascinating personality, he made use of it to attract to his Court any person he fancied might prove of service to the cause he had set his heart on, namely, the invasion of England, and usurpation of the English throne; and no sooner had he seen the young M'Alister and learned who he was, than he forthwith set to work to make himself extremely agreeable to him.

The Old Pretender had a large following in France. Like all the Stuarts, he could assume, at will, very charming manners, and this by no means slight asset,

combined with his romantic appearance and circumstances, won for him a host of admirers among the fair sex, who were ever in constant attendance at his so-called Court functions. Indeed, the glamour surrounding him was such that the young M'Alister succumbed to it at once, and it needed very little persuasion to enrol him under the Stuart banner, a staunch Jacobite. Thus, when he finally tore himself away from all the gaieties of the Old Pretender's Court, to return to his quiet and peaceful Scottish home, it was with the pledge that he would participate in the rising the Old Pretender hoped very shortly to initiate. However, as he knew his father was a firm adherent of the Hanoverian cause, he took very good care to tell no one of his devotion to the Stuart cause, not even his fiancée, to whom he was married soon after his arrival at M'Alister Castle. The marriage was celebrated in a manner befitting so momentous an occasion; and on the return of the bride and bridegroom from their honeymoon, a banquet, on a scale unprecedented in the history of the family, was given in the great dining-room of M'Alister Castle, whilst the splendour of the ball that followed it had never been equalled, and could, everyone said, never be surpassed.

Pending moving into a larger house, the young couple took up their abode on a small farm in a picturesque glen, about a mile and a half from M'Alister Castle, and they had been there only a few weeks, when young M'Alister received a message, informing him that the Old Pretender was in Perth at the head of an army, and desiring him to join his standard there at once.

M'Alister would seem then, for the first time, to have told his wife about his pledge to the Old Pre-

tender. The revelation naturally came as a great shock to her, and she tried her utmost to dissuade her husband from having anything to do with the attempted insurrection. It was in vain, however; he had given his promise to his Royal friend, he said, and he intended to keep it. No M'Alister yet had been known to break a pledge. Accordingly, he bade farewell to his pretty girl wife, and, at the head of a small band of enthusiastic young clansmen, he rode off to join the Pretender.

When his father learned what had happened, fearing the Jacobites might at any moment visit that part of the country, he fortified his castle against them and persuaded his daughter-in-law to leave the farm, and come to him for protection, which she did. Weeks passed, and no news came of the young M'Alister. Then, one dark and stormy November night, a young man from Braemar arrived, with a startling story. He declared a great battle had been fought between the Jacobites under the Earl of Mar and the Hanoverians. He said the Jacobites had won the day, inflicting terrible losses on the Hanoverians, the Duke of Argyll, the leader of King George's troops, being among the slain. The Old Pretender, he added, had arrived on the scene shortly after the battle was concluded, and had gone to Scone, accompanied by Mar, to be crowned king, King James VII.

The wife of the young M'Alister was much elated at these tidings, especially as the bearer of them threw out a hint that she might very shortly see her husband, but the laird received them very cautiously. He knew how trifling happenings often get exaggerated, and being very sceptical as to the alleged strength of the Pretender's army, he advised his daughter-in-law not to treat the news too seriously.

Some hours later found her seated alone in her bedroom, warming herself in front of a pine log fire, that crackled and spurted merrily on the old-fashioned hearth.

Her room, a small apartment, in a rather isolated part of the castle, being on the third storey of the tower, opened upon a narrow passage at the head of a somewhat gloomy flight of winding stone stairs, and had two small windows overlooking the paved courtyard of the castle and commanding an extensive view of the meadowland, high road, and river beyond. Every now and then, the young laird's wife would rise from her seat by the fire, go to one of the windows and peer out at the storm, which, still raging, rose at times to demoniacal fury and then appeared to die away in a long series of sobs and wails, that seemed to her, in her disturbed state of mind, which was continually wandering to the battlefield and her beloved husband, to resemble the cries and moans of a stricken host.

Occasionally, a sound, like horses' hoofs in the far distance made the young wife run again to the window and listen, full of hope that it might at last be her eagerly looked for husband, but it invariably proved a false alarm, and she returned to her seat by the fire, disappointed and dejected. Unwilling to go to bed, lest she should miss the joy of hearing him come, she kept pacing up and down the apartment, pausing whenever her ears caught any sound that was not due to the elements, and in was not until the big clock on the landing beneath her struck the hour of midnight, that she at last undressed and got into bed, forgetting, in her agitation, to say her prayers.

Nevertheless, she soon fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, from which she awoke with a violent start.

The wind was still raging furiously round the tower, lashing the window-panes with snow and sleet, and howling demoniacally down the chimney and along the gloomy old corridor outside. Suddenly it died down, and her heart gave a great thump, as, once again, she fancied she heard the sound of hoofs on the high road. She listened eagerly. Yes, there was no doubt this time, it was really hoofs, horse's hoofs, coming at a great pace along the high road, in the direction of the castle. Nearer and nearer they came, ringing out clear and well defined in the now almost preternatural hush.

Soon they arrived at the lodge gates. A momentary pause, during which the iron gates swung, groaning, back on their rusty hinges, and then, once again, the hoofs were in motion.

On they came, at a furious rate, round the front of the castle and across the cobble stones of the great courtyard to the lower door. Feeling certain that it was her husband, Mrs. M'Alister now sat up in bed, full of the most delightful expectation.

He was actually here, here at last, and in a few more minutes she would be in his arms—her fears and worries ended. What bliss!

What puzzled her, however, was the silence that greeted his arrival. She heard him dismount at the great door of the tower, and fully expected to hear him shout to the porter, but he uttered no sound, and although she strained her ears, and her faculties were all wonderfully on the alert, she could hear no jangling of the massive door chain, nor thrusting back of bolts. All was absolutely still. She wanted to get up and run to the bedroom door to greet him, but something, she could not explain or define, prevented her and held her spellbound where she was.

In this curious and almost paralytic state, she heard footsteps, which she recognized as her husband's (he had a very individual tread), suddenly begin to mount the staircase. Step by step, without a pause, up and up they came, ringing out loud and clear on the hard stones. At length they reached the passage and came steadily along it without a pause, till they arrived at her room. Then, to her alarm and amazement, a strange thing happened. She heard the door, which she distinctly remembered locking, suddenly fly open, and felt a current of icy air sweep through the room, whilst footsteps, her husband's footsteps, slowly crossed the floor. The spell which had hitherto held her in its grip now abruptly relaxed, and leaning forward, she hurriedly drew back the curtains¹ from her bed.

As she did so, one of the heavy pine logs fell off the fire, and bursting into a flame, illuminated the entire apartment with a lurid glow. To her indescribable horror she now saw, seated in an arm-chair by the hearth, a man, clad in the M'Alister tartan, but without a head. Stretching its arms out, as if desirous of embracing her, it slowly rose and commenced walking towards her. She tried to call out, but could not emit a sound. Continuing to advance, the figure took from its breast an eagle's plume,² bathed in blood, and threw at her. This was the climax. Ere the plume struck the bed, she fainted.

In the morning the maid, who came to call her, found her lying on the bed, still unconscious. She eventually recovered, to learn that the Jacobites, instead of defeating Argyll, had been vanquished by

¹ Most four-poster beds in those days had curtains, which were invariably drawn closely round them at night-time.

² *Romance of the Aristocracy*, by Sir J. B. Burke, Vol. III.

him, and that her husband had been taken prisoner and executed immediately after the battle, i.e. on the night of the storm.

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The doom pronounced on the M'Alisters by the widow thus remained unbroken, and this branch of the clan, in the male line, soon afterwards became extinct.

CHAPTER XX

THE GIPSY'S CURSE

IN the early part of the nineteenth century, a united and eminently respectable family, whom I will name Harding,¹ lived in the vicinity of Bedford Square, London. Mr. Harding held a very good and responsible position at Somerset House. He had two children, Maria and George, and at the time the incidents I am about to narrate occurred, Maria, a very pretty, dark-eyed girl of nineteen, was living at home with her parents, whilst George, Maria's senior by a year or so, was pursuing his studies at Oxford. Great things were expected of George. To begin with, he would, of course, take a first-class honours degree; this would be followed, naturally, by a post in the Diplomatic Service, and then, also, as a matter of course, he would receive ribbons and crosses, awards, and decorations innumerable. Possibly, he, himself, may have had some doubt as to whether he should merit these distinctions, but on this point his fond and doting parents had no doubt whatsoever, and his future, as they foresaw it, was assuredly one of unsurpassed brilliance.

And Maria's future, as seen by them in their mind's eye, was no less rosy. She was engaged to Frederick

¹ Though the names given in the narrative are fictitious, the main facts are guaranteed as true. They originally appeared in a publication entitled, *Sayings and Doings, or Sketches from Life*, and were reproduced in *News from the Invisible World*, by T. Charley.

Langdale, the son of a very wealthy and influential neighbour, and, apparently, great things were expected of him, too, his parents prophesying his successful candidature for Parliament, and, as a climax to his Parliamentary career, if not the Premiership, at least a seat in the Cabinet. Hence, Maria, sooner or later, would be a great society hostess, a peeress, and possibly, even, a duchess. As both she and Frederick were very young, however, their marriage was not to take place for some time, not until she was of age and he had seen a little of the world, a tour on the Continent being considered in those days an essential part of every wealthy young man's training and education.

Frederick, then, at the time this story opens, was busily engaged making his plans for going abroad, and it was thus that matters stood when Mr. Harding set out one morning as usual for Somerset House.

His route took him through Charlotte Street, Bloomsbury, and he was striding along, swinging his umbrella, a habit of his, when a somewhat strangely attired woman suddenly stepped out from a doorway and said :

"Pray remember poor Martha the Gipsy, and give me a halfpenny for charity, sir. Pray do."

Now, Mr. Harding was a subscriber to the Mendicity Society, an institution which proposed to check begging in the streets by the novel mode of never giving anything ; moreover, he was a magistrate ; and moreover, again, he had no change. Consequently, annoyed at being bothered, he told the woman, somewhat sharply, to go about her business, and continued on his way. He had not gone many yards, however, before he heard someone running

after him, and, much to his indignation, the woman touched him on the arm and said again :

“Pray remember Martha the Gipsy.”

He took no notice this time, but on her running by his side and persistently asking him to give her money, he at last lost his temper and, quite contrary to his usual habit, for he was a very proper person in every respect, he swore at her, telling her to leave off plaguing him or he would give her in charge.

“A curse !” Martha, as she styled herself, cried out. “Have I lived to hear myself cursed, and by a poor, weak, haughty little creature like you. Look at me, sir.”

Fearing a scene if he disobeyed, for the woman seemed bent on creating a disturbance, Mr. Harding did as requested and involuntarily started. Never in his life had he seen a more striking-looking person or a more infuriated countenance. From the casual glance he had first bestowed on her, he imagined her old, but now, when he looked at her, she seemed young, or at any rate on the young side. She was tall and well built, with a wealth of black hair which hung in disorder over her neck and shoulders. Her skin was olive, her lips coral, and her teeth as white and even as any teeth he had ever seen.

But it was her eyes that now held his attention. Big and black, they glared at him with the wild, unbridled fury of a beast of prey. Indeed, there was something so extraordinarily non-human about them that they not only frightened him, they fascinated him to such an extent that he could not remove his gaze from them.

“Mark me, sir,” the woman went on, shaking the finger of a beautifully shaped hand, albeit dirty and begrimed, in his face, “my curse is on you and yours.

Three times shall you see me again before you die, and something terrible will happen in your home on each occasion."

There was something so solemn in her tones as she pronounced these words that Mr. Harding was immeasurably impressed. The woman seemed to him no ordinary gipsy. There was something very unusual about her, something undoubtedly weird, and as he stood listening to her, unable to tear himself from the spot, an uncanny feeling stole over him, quite out of keeping with the bright blue sky overhead and the cheery morning sunshine. As the streets were now fast filling with people on their way to business and he did not wish to appear to be having an altercation with the woman, he mechanically took some silver from his pocket and handed it to her.

"There's something for you, my good woman," he said. "Let us part friends."

"Good woman, and money, after you have cursed me," the gipsy shouted scornfully. "Keep your silver. It would do me no good, and it will do you no good either," and she savagely thrust the hand containing the money from her. "It's too late now, proud gentleman," she went on, "the deed is done. I have met curse with curse; and, as sure as my name is Martha, my curse will take effect."

Saying which she drew her ragged red cloak about her shoulders and turning down a by street, disappeared in the direction of St. Giles.

Mr. Harding, angry with himself for having sworn at the woman, walked on, feeling strangely upset. He tried to ridicule the idea of a gipsy's word coming true; and this woman, he argued, was just an ignorant, illiterate gipsy, who, like all her class and race, was very spiteful and malicious when roused. Curses,

of course, were mere empty threats, and no sensible and educated person ever paid any attention to them. Therefore to the winds with them, he would give neither them nor her another thought. And yet, despite this resolution, her image, the image of a tall woman with black, dishevelled hair, beautiful teeth, and dark flashing eyes, kept coming back to him. He could not, try how he would, dismiss her from his mind. Every now and again, while he was at his work, reading and signing documents, and at his luncheon in a select little restaurant in the Strand, he fancied he heard her repeating, with awful solemnity, those ominous words: "Three times shall you see me again before you die, and something terrible will happen in your home on each occasion," and sometimes they sounded so near that he started and glanced around him in a panic, fully expecting to see her.

When he returned home that afternoon, rather than run the risk of encountering her again, instead of walking, he hired a four-wheeler, and drove, an extravagance in which he very rarely indulged.

His wife, to whom he narrated his adventure of the morning, after they had retired for the night, laughed heartily. She was surprised, she remarked, that a sensible man, such as she took her husband to be, should think seriously of anything a gipsy had said. When she was a girl some friends of hers took her to the gipsy encampment at Norwood, and on receipt of a shilling a gipsy predicted her future, not a word of which had come true.

"That woman, my dear," she went on, "only wanted to frighten you and, apparently, she succeeded. I had no idea you were quite such a silly," and with a final laugh she bade her husband good night and went to sleep.

Not so Mr. Harding. He lay awake half the night, restless and worried, still thinking he could hear the gipsy cursing him, and wishing to God he could recall the curse he had uttered against her.

The following morning found him still thinking of her, and in order to avoid encountering her again, instead of going to Somerset House by the usual direct route, he went by a very circuitous one, and even then he kept imagining she was following him. Whenever he heard a woman's voice behind him in the street, he became sick with apprehension, fearing to look round lest he should see her, and in turning a corner he proceeded carefully and cautiously, fully prepared to turn tail and fly, should he see her approaching from an opposite direction.

In short, no matter where he went or what he did, he was ever haunted by the horror of beholding her again. Moreover, the malediction she had uttered rang incessantly in his ears and took such possession of him that more than once in the office he found himself quite unconsciously writing down on paper the words: "Three times shall you see me again before you die, and something terrible will happen in your home on each occasion."

As day after day passed, however, without any sign of an encounter with the dreaded gipsy, Mr. Harding took to thinking of her less and less, and he had almost dismissed her entirely from his mind, when a great calamity befell him and his family.

Maria, having suffered from a delicate chest, had invariably caused her parents some anxiety during the winter months, but, up to the present, she had always been, apparently, in the pink of health, when the weather was warm. Now, however, anyone could see that Maria was consumptive, and the family

doctor warned Mr. and Mrs. Harding that they might very shortly lose their beloved daughter. Of course, Maria was not told that her condition was serious, and the whole household feigned their usual good spirits, in order that Maria should not know she would never be any better.

Such was the none too happy state of affairs in the Harding family, when, one morning, Frederick Langdale drove up to the Harding's house and invited Mr. Harding, who was taking a few days' holiday, to go for a drive with him, first of all to Tattersalls, where he was going to purchase some horses for his father, and then to Hyde Park. Mr. Harding willingly accepted Frederick's invitation, and the two set off together, Mrs. Harding and Maria standing on the doorstep waving their adieux.

Presumably out of politeness to Mr. Harding, to whom he was accustomed to show deference, Frederick asked him to drive, and Mr. Harding, who had not handled the reins for a very long time and had never been a very skilful whip, consented. He soon discovered, however that the horses, which were very young and fresh, were more than he could manage, and as they turned into Great Russell Street, he tried to pass the reins to Frederick. In so doing, however, he bungled. Frederick, presumably, owing to some misunderstanding, did not take them, and they slipped down between the horses, who, thus freed from restraint, reared wildly in the air and plunging forward, dashed the carriage against a post, both Frederick and Mr. Harding being, in consequence, thrown out on to the pavement. As the horses were then struggling desperately to free themselves from the carriage, it was no wonder that Frederick, before he could pick himself up, received

a nasty kick on the forehead, which rendered him unconscious. Mr. Harding was not kicked, but his right arm and collar bone were broken, and he was so badly bruised and shaken that he could hardly move. When, at last, he had managed to raise himself sufficiently to look around, he saw Frederick lying, face downwards on the kerbstone, in a pool of blood, with Martha the gipsy, her black, dishevelled hair blowing about in the wind, bending over him.

As she looked up and met the terror-stricken gaze of Mr. Harding, her eyes instantly lighted up with glee, and her whole attitude assumed such a diabolical exultancy that Mr. Harding, immeasurably shocked, fainted.

Fortunately, his injuries proved slight; those of Frederick Langdale, on the other hand, were severe, and for some time little hope was entertained of his recovery. He did mend, however, and was well on the way to convalescence, when Maria became suddenly worse.

It was suggested by the doctor that she should go to the South Coast for change of air, and an attempt was made to take her, but it was found that she could not stand so long a journey by coach—there were no trains in those days—and, owing to her weak condition, all idea of her going to the seaside for her health had to be abandoned.

Being now confined to her room and, consequently, having little to amuse her, she one day expressed so keen a longing to see Frederick, who had not been able to visit her since his accident, that a message was sent to him, imploring him to come to the house at once.

On receiving his reply, which was to the effect that his doctor would not allow him to venture out that

day, but that he would be round at the house the following morning, Maria was so overcome with emotion, whether of joy at finding that he would visit her the following day, or disappointment at not seeing him sooner, one cannot say, that she sank back on her pillow and burst into a flood of tears.

At that moment the sun, which was almost directly overhead, shone so fiercely into the room and on to the sick girl's face, that Mrs. Harding asked her husband to draw down the blind. Harding, accordingly, rose and going to the window was about to do as she requested, when he started back in horror.

"Good heavens, what's the matter?" Mrs. Harding cried, looking at him aghast.

"She's there!" Mr. Harding ejaculated hoarsely, "in the street, and she looked straight at me and smiled."

"Who?" Mrs. Harding asked.

"The gipsy, that infernal gipsy woman," Mr. Harding responded.

Mrs. Harding ran to the window. On the opposite side of the street stood a tall woman, with long dishevelled hair, sunken sallow cheeks, and big dark eyes. There was something peculiarly picturesque in the woman's appearance, but it was combined with something so sinister, that Mrs. Harding had no sooner caught sight of her and encountered her smile than she withdrew from the window with a shudder, whereupon the woman burst into a peal of diabolical laughter.

Mr. Harding quickly drew down the blind.

"This is the second time she has appeared," he exclaimed. "I wonder what misfortune awaits us now?"

An agonized cry from Mrs. Harding answered his



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question. She had gone to the bedside of the invalid and had found her dead !

Twice then had this fiendish Martha appeared to Mr. Harding, bringing calamity with her, the second greater than the first ; and, according to her curse, she would appear to him once again. 'But what trouble, following in the wake of her third appearance, could possibly entail more misery than he was now suffering ? There before him lay his beloved daughter, wrapped in the grim and terrible sleep of death. It seemed so like an awful dream, and, as if in a dream, Mr. Harding walked to the window again and mechanically pulling aside the blind, peeped out. Martha was no longer in evidence, but as he peered in fearful expectancy up and down the street, he heard a loud chuckling laugh, which sounded just below the window.

Time, they say, heals all sorrows, and as the weeks passed by the Hardings became more and more reconciled to their loss. They still had George, and all their joy and hopes were now centred on him.

Soon after he left Oxford he became engaged to the very charming daughter of a near neighbour of the Hardings, and arrangements were made for a speedy marriage. It took place at Christmas. The bride and bridegroom spent their honeymoon at an inland watering-place, and a few days after their return to town Mr. and Mrs. Harding, senior, gave a banquet in their honour. All went merrily and without the slightest hitch till midnight. The supper had just been completed, the King's health drunk, and Mrs. George Harding had just risen to sing a quaint song, entitled "The Poor Maiden," which was very popular at that time, when a noise, resembling that produced by the falling of a very heavy weight, echoed through

the house. The noise was repeated, and then all present heard what they took to be some very ponderous object, such as an enormous cask, descending the stairs rapidly and violently. Starting from the top story, on and on it came, right down into the hall, and passing through the hall—by the way, as it did so, the door of the dining-room, in which the banquet was being held, was forced open, as by a rude gust of wind, so that it was now ajar—went down the stairs leading to the kitchen. On its arrival there all was suddenly quiet.¹

The alarm caused by the incident was general. The children of the party crept close to their mothers. Mrs. Harding, senior, thinking of the servants, rang the bell, to summon and make enquiries of them, while her daughter-in-law looked appealingly at George, but no one, apparently, dared leave the room to find out, for themselves, what had happened. Mr. Harding, pale as death, was seen to stare with terrified eyes first at the half-open door and then at something or someone visible only to himself, pursuing its way along by the wall of the apartment to the fireplace. He was still staring at this object, when one of the servants entered the room and, in response to Mrs. Harding's questioning, informed her that they had heard the noise in the kitchen, and supposed that it had come from the dining-room. Not wishing to alarm the servants, Mrs. Harding merely said that the noise, then, must have come from the street, and dismissing the maid, asked Mrs. George Harding to sing.

The festivities then recommenced, but there was no longer any fun or jollity in them. Even the most

¹ Remarkable as this incident may seem, it is quoted as a fact in *News from the Invisible World*.

material person present, so it would seem, had agreed that there had been something strange and unearthly about the mysterious noise they had heard on the stairs, and it was obvious that everyone was anxious to get away from the house as soon as possible. When, consequently, the party speedily broke up, and the last guest had gone, and the son and daughter-in-law had followed suit, Mr. Harding told his wife that Martha the Gipsy was the cause of all the disturbance. It was she, he said, who had suddenly opened the dining-room door, not the wind, and she had come in and stood with her back to the fireplace, smiling diabolically at him. The moment Wilson, the maid, entered, he added, she vanished.

"It was only your imagination, my dear," Mrs. Harding remarked, albeit somewhat half-heartedly.

"Perhaps," her husband responded, "but, all the same, I'm certain we shall experience another great trouble very shortly, for I have now seen that infernal woman, or demon, for that is what I think she must be, for the third time."

They then went to bed, and despite a certain feeling of depression, Mrs. Harding slept soundly until the maid rapped at the door in the morning. She then awoke and spoke to her husband. As he made no reply, she got up and looked at him. He was dead. His heart, it would seem, had never been very strong, and the excitement of the evening had, apparently, proved too much for him. In any case, there is no getting away from the fact that the gipsy's curse, culminating in his death, was, *in toto*, fulfilled.

Some little time after the events recorded above, something happened in connection with them suffi-

ciently weird to give even the thickest skinned sceptic (with regard to the superphysical) food for thought.

My authority for the following, and a friend of his, named Ellis, were walking late one evening from the City to Harley Street, and on arriving in the vicinity of Bedford Square, Ellis, who had been narrating the story of the gipsy's curse to his companion, pointed down Charlotte Street and exclaimed :

"That is the street where Harding first saw the gipsy. They say she still haunts it."

"Come, come," his companion laughed, "you surely don't expect to take what you've just told me for gospel."

"Whether you believe it or not," Ellis replied, somewhat curtly, "it's true. I have the facts from the Hardings themselves, and, moreover, I was at the banquet they gave and heard the mysterious noises in the house, the night before Mr. Harding died."

"But you didn't see Martha?" his friend rejoined.

"I know I didn't," Ellis answered sharply, "but Harding did."

"Aha," his friend laughed, "I thought so. Harding saw her, but you didn't, and no one else did. Hence it is very evident that Harding had imbibed somewhat too freely."

He had barely spoken thus when both he and Ellis nearly started out of their skins upon suddenly hearing footsteps close behind them. Instinctively they turned sharply round to see who it was, and almost at their very heels they beheld a woman, enveloped in a red shawl, with dishevelled long black hair, very white cheeks, and big dark eyes.

"Remember poor Martha the Gipsy," she cried, and bursting into a shrill peal of mocking laughter, disappeared down Charlotte Street.

“Well,” Ellis remarked, “what do you think of THAT ? ”

“I don’t know,” his friend who, as I have already stated, is my authority for this story, replied, “but it’s deuced queer.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE DRUMMER'S CURSE AND THE CURSE OF MOY

FEW places in the British Isles can boast a more famous tradition than Cortachy Castle, in Forfarshire, the seat of the Earl of Airlie.

The tradition relative to the curse and subsequent hauntings briefly told is thus: A former Earl of Airlie numbered among his retainers a young drummer of fascinating appearance and amazing manners. For some reason, which tradition does not explain, this drummer had the misfortune to incur the jealousy of the Earl, who, consequently, had him thrust, bound hand and foot, into his own drum, and hurled from one of the turrets of the castle into the courtyard below, the result being, of course, that he was instantaneously killed. Before this very cruel and cowardly murder took place, however, the drummer, it is alleged, cursed the Earl and swore to haunt him and his descendants for ever. That he has kept his word, with regard to succeeding generations of Ogilvies, seems to be well proved, for whenever a member of that branch of the clan to which the Earls of Airlie belong dies, a ghostly drumming, sometimes accompanied by ghostly piping and the tramping of ghostly feet, heralds the event. There are many authentic stories told in corroboration of this haunting. For example:¹ In 1845, Miss Margaret

¹ Vide *The Night Side of Nature*, by Mrs. Crowe, and *Glimpses in the Twilight*, by F. G. Lee, D.D.

Dalrymple, accompanied by her maid, Ann Day, went on a visit to Cortachy Castle. They arrived late in the evening, and Miss Dalrymple had only a short time in which to dress for dinner. Her room was in a somewhat isolated part of the castle, and as she was resting on the sofa, waiting for Day to help her with her toilet, she suddenly heard sounds of music, coming apparently from somewhere beneath her. There was something strangely eerie about these sounds, which, at first, she could not define at all; but, after a while, she was able to distinguish the sound of pipes, and then the distinct beating of a drum. When Day came, she asked her if she knew what the music was, and, rather to her surprise, Day replied that she had heard no music. Her curiosity aroused, Miss Dalrymple determined to ask Earl Airlie for an explanation. Accordingly, when everyone was seated at dinner, she turned to the Earl and said: "What very eerie music you entertained us with an hour or so ago. Who is your drummer?"

Her remark produced an extraordinary effect. The Earl, turning deadly pale, dropped his knife and fork, and left the table. The Countess looked terrified, and everyone ceased talking and appeared exceedingly embarrassed. Miss Dalrymple, realizing now that she had made a *faux pas*, did her best to mend matters by changing the conversation, and nothing further was said on the subject, till the dinner was over and the ladies had retired to the drawing-room. In referring to the incident, Miss Dalrymple asked why her remark about the music she had heard had caused such a sensation, and, in reply, was told the story of the Airlie Drummer, her fellow guests expressing great surprise upon learning that, previously, she had known nothing about it. "Why," they remarked,

“the drummer is the family ghost of the Airlies, and he is never heard beating his drum, excepting before a death in the family. The last time he was heard was just before the Earl’s first wife died, and that is why the Earl turned white and the Countess looked so frightened when you enquired who the drummer was. The subject is an extremely unpleasant one in this family, I can assure you.” Upon hearing this Miss Dalrymple was naturally very much upset. The knowledge that her remark, made in all innocence, had caused such pain and alarm, distressed her not a little, while the thought of having to spend a whole night in the room in which she had heard the much dreaded sounds, filled her with alarm. She managed to screw up her courage, however, and retiring to bed, with a well simulated show of composure, slept quite soundly till the morning. While she was at breakfast, Day was left alone in her room, tidying her things. Suddenly, there was the sound of a heavy vehicle driving at a furious rate along the carriage drive and stopping immediately beneath the window. A few minutes later, another vehicle, with much stamping of hoofs and crunching of gravel, drove up and, likewise, stopped beneath the window. Then, as if following in the wake of the vehicles, came the steady tramp, tramp, tramp of a number of soldiers, accompanied by the shrill notes of pipes and the loud beating of a drum. There was something indescribably weird and unpleasant about the drumming, and it seemed to come right through the floor and pass close by Day, who was much startled, and experienced such an uncanny sensation, that, for some seconds, she hardly dared look round, for fear of seeing something unearthly. Pulling herself together, however, she went to the window and

looked out, and, much to her amazement, there was no sign of any vehicles or soldiers—the courtyard, its stones gleaming in the bright morning sun, was bare and empty. She, therefore, concluded that what she had heard was due to the peculiar acoustic properties of the place and caused by vehicles and soldiers passing along the high road, although the latter was some little distance from the castle.

That evening Miss Dalrymple had the same experience as on the previous night. She was alone in her room waiting for Day to dress her for dinner, when from somewhere beneath her came the same strange strains of music, which gradually developed, so that she could plainly distinguish the pipes and the drum, the latter sounding more distinct even than on the previous occasion, and so near that Miss Dalrymple almost fancied it was in the room. There was something so terrifying about it that she was on the verge of fainting, when, fortunately, Day arrived, and the sounds, as before, immediately ceased. Unable to bear the idea of hearing it again, she left the castle the following morning.

Some months later, the Countess of Airlie died at Brighton, in giving birth to twins, and among her effects was a diary, in which the above incidents were recorded, the Countess having appended a note to the effect that she had felt instinctively that Miss Dalrymple's experience, while staying at the castle, was the prognostication of her own death. I must add that it was not until Miss Dalrymple had left the castle some days that she told her maid, Day, what she had heard there, and that Day told her of the equally remarkable experience that she had had there.

Like many other family hauntings, however, the

Cortachy haunting is not confined to one spot ; it may be experienced anywhere on the Airlie estates, as the following incident will show.

Five years after Miss Dalrymple heard the phantom drummer, a certain young Englishman, whom I will designate Mr. Lovell, was on his way to the Tulchan, a shooting lodge belonging to the Earl of Airlie, where he had been invited to spend a few days by the Earl's eldest son, Lord Ogilvie. He was riding a stout pony, and one of the Earl's keepers, a typical Highlander of that period, dour, tough, and wiry, also mounted, was acting as his guide. For two solid hours they had threaded their way across a bleak and desolate moor, with the wind from the mountain top whistling in their faces, and, at times, almost forcing them to a standstill. For the most part it was pitch dark ; but every now and then a rift in the black stormy clouds enabled them to catch a glimpse of the scenery through which they were passing.

It was horribly inhospitable and monotonous—a wild expanse of brown, sodden soil, with, here and there, thick growths of gorse and bracken, big tarns and dreary-looking swamps, whose dark surfaces glittered ominously, whenever they caught the struggling moonbeams. Also, occasionally, the white trunks of decayed trees lent an additional dreariness to the scene, giving it, in fact, a sense of isolation and depression that seemed to sink into the very soul.

At last, after what seemed an endless journey, both the night and the landscape were so thoroughly uninviting, Mr. Lovell, to his unmitigated joy, saw twinkling lights, which his guide informed him were those of the Tulchan. Visions of a roaring fire, in front of which stood his host inviting him to hot

drinks, now considerably raised Mr. Lovell's spirits, and he was congratulating himself on having accomplished the journey without any real mishap, when, from a low ridge of ground, just in front of him, came soft strains of music. "Hulloa!" he exclaimed, "what's that?"

The guide made no reply, but urged his pony to go faster. The music grew louder, and the clouds, suddenly parting, let through a broad belt of moonlight, which illuminated the whole landscape, throwing into strong relief all its outstanding features.

There was not another habitation of any kind, saving the Tulchan, visible for miles around, and no cover in which one could be concealed, excepting a very few low gorse bushes; consequently, Lovell felt he must be mistaken, and that the music could only emanate from the shooting lodge.

As they advanced, the music became louder and louder, until, presently, it developed into the unmistakable sound of a band, pipes, fifes, and a drum, the drum being especially conspicuous, and there was something so curiously unpleasant and eerie about it, that Mr. Lovell, who began to feel distinctly uncomfortable, asked his guide, more, perhaps, for the sake of hearing his own voice than anything else, the meaning of it. Instead of answering him intelligibly, however, the Highlander merely muttered something under his breath and urged his pony into a furious gallop. They were soon level with the ridge and the few gorse bushes that lay scattered along it, but there was no sign of any musicians, and yet the music continued, louder and weirder than ever. On arriving at the door of the Tulchan, it abruptly ceased.

To Mr. Lovell's surprise Lord Ogilvie was not there

to welcome him, and he was informed that his lordship had been unexpectedly summoned to London, on account of the illness of his father. The following day, the ninth Earl of Airlie passed away in Regent Street, London, thus affording another testimony to the truth of the tradition that the phantom drummer of Cortachy, in fulfilment of his curse, haunts the Airlies always before a death in the family.¹

“*The Curse of Moy*”

One of the most interesting of the many traditions of the Western Highlands of Scotland is that of “The Curse of Moy,”² which Sir Walter Scott makes the theme of one of his ballads in the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. The Castle of Moy in the tradition was the ancient residence of Mackintosh, Chief of the Clan Chattan. Situated in a hollow, amid the bare frowning peaks of the mountains of Inverness, it stood on the rocky stones of a dark, deep lake, that was surrounded on all sides by a dense forest of firs.

A more ghostly and, at the same time, sinister looking castle could scarcely be imagined. Yet, on a certain evening several centuries ago it was the scene of rare gaiety and rejoicing, the occasion being the ball of an heir to the property. Lights shone in all the windows of the massive stone building, while in the great hall a large concourse of people, which included, besides the family and household, many tenants and retainers, were assembled, some sitting round the fire listening to stirring and amusing tales,

¹ Rumour says the phantom music has been heard several times since these incidents I have quoted, but I can give no reliable evidence on this point.

² Though the main features in this story are taken from a well-known legend, I cannot vouch for the authenticity of all the details.

and others watching the young couples dancing nimbly on the pine floor, to the wild music of the pipers. As it grew later, the fun and jollity increased, the dancers capered about with more than their usual vigour, the wine flowed more freely, while those gathered round the ingle broke out in uproarious song. Never before had these grim old walls witnessed a more thoroughly festive scene. Inverness girls have always been famed for their beauty, and, on this particular occasion, there were several present whom it would have been hard to match in all Scotland.

Apparently, when all this merrymaking was at its height, an abrupt hush fell upon the assembly, and all eyes were directed towards an old woman, who suddenly appeared on the threshold of the hall. Thin and bent, with long snow-white hair hanging loosely around her neck and shoulders, she had features which, despite her age, yet retained more than a mere semblance of beauty. All sorts of uncanny powers were attributed to her, and as a sudden appearance on her part was generally believed to foreshadow either a death or some very dire catastrophe, a thrill of positive fear ran through the entire assembly, and when she began to move across the hall towards the spot where Mackintosh, the young chief of the Clan Chattan was standing, there was almost a stampede, so anxious was everyone to get out of her way.

With withering glances of scorn at the pale faces and shrinking forms around her, she startled all present by suddenly pointing at young Mackintosh and crying out :

“An heir, an heir, 'tis vain, 'tis vain.”

She then held up her hand, as if to enjoin silence, and related the following story of baseness and cruelty, committed, exactly sixty years previously,

by the Chief of Moy, ancestor of the present Chieftain.

For many years there had been a feud between the federal clan of Chattan (consisting of the families of Mackintosh, MacPherson, and others), and the Grants (their clan consisting of Grants, Urquharts, and others), and one day, Mackintosh, Chief of the Chattans, proposed there should be a truce, and that the leaders of the opposing clans should meet at Moy Castle to discuss the possibilities of peace. As the Grants were weary of the struggle they at once acquiesced, and their leader, the veteran Urquhart, whose headquarters, the castle of Urquhart,¹ was on a promontory of Loch Ness, accompanied by young Alvah, a chieftain of the Grants, renowned for his bravery, and certain other chieftains, went to Moy, relying on the word of its owner. They met with a cordial reception, and a solemn pledge was taken by all present to end the Grant and Chattan feud and fight no more. Urquhart and Alvah stayed to the last, and it was night before they said good-bye to their former foes and finally set off home together.

They had crossed the wild and barren moor of Badenoch and were about to plunge into the dense and gloomy wood of Glen Iral, through which the mountain torrent Iral roared its winding way to the deep black waters of the Nairn, when the terrible slogan of the Chattans, followed by the shrill blast of a bugle, suddenly resounded through the still night air, and a number of Chattans, armed to the teeth, their faces horribly grim and savage in the pale moonlight, sprang out from among the tall pine trees and surrounded the two dumbfounded Grants on all

¹ Now in ruins.

sides. Urquhart was unarmed, but Alvah, drawing his claymore, and shouting, "Stand fast, Craig Ellachie!" the war-cry of his Clan, struck out right and left, killing the foremost of his foes and wounding several others.

In the end, however, both he and Urquhart were overpowered, taken by force to the rocky Isle of Moy,¹ where there was a massive stone building that served as a prison for persons captured by the Chattans, and thrown into a foul dungeon.

The news of Moy's treachery soon reaching the ears of Margaret, the beautiful daughter of the renowned Urquhart and the greatly beloved fiancée of Alvah, she resolved, much as she feared and loathed Moy, whose offer of marriage she had, some short time before, rejected with scorn, to seek an interview with him and plead for his prisoners' lives.

Going alone to Moy Castle, one cannot help thinking very foolishly, for her knowledge of the Chief should have warned her of the kind of person she had to deal with, she was shown at once into the Chieftain's presence. What followed might have been anticipated, and it surely would have been by anyone less innocent, or of a less unsuspicious nature than Margaret; for the circumstances attendant on her mission made her case one that has ever provided material for the ultra-sensational novelist, and will continue to do so, at least as long as men are men, and women are women, which may be, despite feminism, for many years yet.

Anyhow, the Chief, laughing heartily to himself at her unmitigated folly in coming to him, promised

¹ In the centre of Loch Moy. The spot where the prison is believed to have stood is still pointed out.

her the life of one of the captives, whichever she chose, on the usual condition, and although she was obdurate at first, so great was her love for the two men for whose lives she was pleading, that in the end she agreed to the Chief of Moy's conditions and allowed herself to be the victim of his infamous proposals.

Hours later, escorted by a retainer of the castle, she made her way, pale and trembling, to the shore of Loch Moy and was rowed to the islet. Her emotions on seeing the two men she loved chained to the walls of a gloomy dungeon, foul-smelling and reeking with damp, were indescribable. After embracing them both in turn, she told them the purport of her visit, namely, that she had come with a message from Moy to say one of them would be freed, and that it was for her to name which. She then chose her father, declaring she would stay with Alvah. To this, however, her father would not agree. He was old, he said, and had not many more years to live, therefore his life was of less value than that of Alvah. After much discussion he at last prevailed upon the youthful lovers to adopt his view, and when Margaret finally took her departure, it was in the full belief that she would meet her betrothed in a few hours' time on the breezy heights of neighbouring Badenoch, as the custodian of the prison assured her that her lover should be set free soon after she went.

In joyful expectation of meeting Alvah again, and this time of remaining with him for good, for they had arranged to get married almost immediately, Margaret hurried to the heights of Badenoch. It was a wildly beautiful spot. Open moorland, covered in places with flowering gorse, and, here and there, great rugged boulders and deep, silent pools, that

reflected the swiftly moving clouds on their gleaming unruffled surfaces.

Selecting a large stone, close to one of these miniature lakes, Margaret sat down and thought over all that had happened, that terrible scene in Moy Castle, which she prayed the coming years would gradually eradicate from her mind, and that last sad and tragic parting from her father, whom she had always loved so tenderly.

Suddenly, from afar off, in the direction of the shores of the lake she had just quitted, came a faint cry, but although faint, one that was so awful, so full of agony and terror, that she sprang to her feet in alarm, and listened.

It was not repeated, but the gentle rustling of the wind, blowing from the loch, seemed to bear with it the sound of groans. A horrible suspicion now seized her, and feeling faint and dizzy, she sank down upon the stone. The minutes passed, and she was still sitting there, sick with apprehension and hideous thoughts, when she suddenly heard voices and footsteps, and glancing round perceived four horrible looking ruffians, in Chattan tartans, carrying with them the bodies of two men. Without saying a word they came right up to her, and, with savage oaths, flung the bodies at her feet. They then turned on their heels and walked away, pausing every now and then to look round at her and laugh. The awful suspicions Margaret had entertained were verified, the bodies lying in front of her were those of her father and lover. They had been murdered in the most cruel and brutal manner.

The shock was so great that for a long time Margaret could only sit and stare at the bodies, speechless with agony, and her mind in a stupified condition. When,

however, her faculties at last reasserted themselves, she got up and working with fearful energy made a cairn over them. Having done that, she knelt down beside the cairn, and amidst the intense silence of that lovely stretch of country she cursed Moy and prayed that he might pine away, smitten with some horrible lingering disease, and that no Chief of Moy should have a son who would survive him and inherit his estates.

Her brain on fire, she now sprang up and cursing the moonbeams that illuminated the beach with a cold white light, she ran off, where she neither knew nor cared. Wandering aimlessly on, she alighted at length on a hut built on the rugged slope of Badenoch. It had been long uninhabited, but being stoutly built was still in a tolerably good state of repair. Seeing a pile of straw in one corner of it, Margaret threw herself on it, and, worn out, soon fell asleep.

When she awoke, her hair was grey and she was a prematurely old woman. Instead of returning to Urquhart Castle, she made the hut her home, and spent her days wandering about the countryside, constantly visiting the cairn at Badenoch heath and repeating there the curse she had previously uttered.

To return to the scene with which this story opened and which led up to the recital of it. The strange old woman having concluded her story, informed those assembled in the great hall of Moy Castle that she was the Margaret who had been so basely deceived, and having made this statement walked slowly away, repeating, as she went, the words of her curse :
“ No heir, no heir, 'tis vain, 'tis vain ! ”

Her departure saw the end of the revels. Gone was all the joy and gaiety, and a feeling of fearful presentiment and depression reigned in its stead.

That these feelings were not unwarranted was soon proved, for within the next few hours the infant that had been the cause of so much rejoicing died, and the Chief of Moy was left without a son to carry on his name and heritage.

CHAPTER XXII

THE CURSE OF RUDESHEIM

THE ruins of Rudesheim Castle are on the river Rhine, facing the old and beautiful town of Bingen. Both they and the notorious Mausethurm, or Mouse Tower, nearby are haunted, and, owing to curses pronounced there long centuries ago, both are said to bring bad luck to anyone who sleeps in their vicinity all night. There are various traditions as to the origin of the curses, and among them the following :¹

One broiling hot day, in the mid-twelfth century, a troop of Crusaders, steel clad and armed to the teeth, were traversing the desert that lies to the south-west of Jerusalem, when one of them, uttering a loud exclamation, pointed ahead.

"Infidels," he cried. "I can see banners and spears."

"*Gott in himmel*, you are right, Von Rudesheim ! " another of the company observed, shading his eyes with his hand and looking in the direction indicated. "They are Infidels, and, if I am not mistaken, there are large numbers of them."

The attention of all was now concentrated on the objects Von Rudesheim had described, and, presently, the whole desert seemed alive with horsemen, brandishing lances and scimitars, and making for the

¹ Although the main features in this story are in accordance with tradition, I cannot vouch for all the details.

mere handful of Crusaders at top speed. It being one of the Crusaders' codes of honour never to turn tail no matter what the odds, they at once put themselves on the defensive, and awaited with the utmost calmness the coming assault. When it took place, the struggle, though one-sided, was extremely desperate, and the Saracens lost many a doughty warrior before they finally won the victory. Among the captives they took was Han Broemser von Rudesheim, of Rudesheim Castle, and, as was their custom in similar circumstances, they offered their prisoner immediate release, if he renounced the Christian faith and swore to follow the banners of Mahomed. On his refusing to do so, they struck him with their lances and loaded him with chains. Then they made him march on foot with them over the burning, blistering sand, till they arrived at a town, and there they threw him into a dungeon swarming with scorpions and centipedes.

Tormented day and night by foul and venomous insects, with nothing to eat or drink, saving dry crusts of bread and dirty impure water, Rudesheim now underwent such a hell, that he vowed, if only he could escape, he would, on his return home, dedicate his only daughter, the beautiful golden haired Gisela, to the perpetual service of Heaven, in other words, he would place her in a convent. The days dragged wearily on, and Rudesheim was beginning to give up all hope of ever getting out of the dungeon, when the totally unlooked for happened.

In his loneliness, Rudesheim had taken to making friends with the birds that lived in the trees outside his prison, and feeding them. He used to put crumbs of bread through the iron grating of his cell, and the birds used to come and eat them. Well, one day, to

his surprise, he saw a dove among the birds that came to take the crumbs out of his hands, and seized with a sudden inspiration, he tore a piece off his shirt, and writing a message on it to his friends (using his blood for ink), he fastened it round the dove's leg. Of course, there was only the very barest chance that anything would come of it, but his despair was so great that he would have been glad to try even a less chance, and as the dove flew away, he again registered his vow—this time swearing on his knees with the utmost intensity and earnestness that Gisela should pass all the rest of her life in the convent near Rudesheim, if only his friends got the message and came to his rescue.

We must now shift the scene to the Crusaders' camp, about twenty miles distant. Herbert Schwartz and Karl Falkenstein, two of Rudesheim's friends, were strolling about together, talking of their far-off home in Germany, when someone called out to them from behind: "Ho, my fine gentlemen, would you know your fates?" And turning round they saw Ernest Bieber, a fellow soldier, whose wild erratic nature caused him to be somewhat shunned.

"What is this?" Schwartz demanded, looking at him sternly. "Some new folly?"

"No folly at all," Bieber retorted. "I am quite serious. If you would like to learn what is going to befall you in the future, whether you are coming into that fortune, you so often talk about, or if you are destined to have your crown broken in our next affray with the sons of Belial, then I can oblige you. Listen. I was wandering outside the camp an hour ago, when I chanced to come upon a cave, so black and forbidding that I fancied it must be one of the many ways that lead to Avernus. Well, as I was

gazing at it, in momentary expectation of seeing some spirit from the Styx appear, a voice from within suddenly cried out, in as good German as anyone in this camp speaks : ' Welcome, Ernest Bieber ! Walk in and hear what fortune has in store for you.' "

" You are lying," Falkenstein said scornfully.

" By the beard of the Prophet I'm not," Bieber responded. " I swear by all that's Holy everything I am saying is true. Let me continue. ' Who are you that knows my name ? ' I said, straining my eyes to pierce the darkness and at the same time gripping my sword handle."

" ' I am Kariffa, the hermit,' the voice answered, ' walk in and be not afraid.' "

" Now, as there was something in the voice that inspired me with confidence I obeyed. Directly I crossed the threshold, a crystal was thrust into my hand. After a while, it suddenly became luminous, and I saw in it a vivid picture of myself, lying on a battlefield, with two lance heads sticking upright in my chest."

" ' Behold your destiny,' the hermit said, ' nothing can avert it.' "

" What happened then ? " Falkenstein enquired.

" Nothing," Bieber responded. " I came away. But the weirdness of it lay in the fact that I never as much as caught a glimpse of Kariffa, nor could I tell from the voice whether Kariffa was a man or a woman."

" It was all so dark in the cave, I suppose," Schwartz observed.

" As dark as hell," Bieber said, " and now if you desire an adventure, here is one awaiting you. Go to the cave and see if you have any better luck than I. Two lance heads ! Ah, well, that is better than

returning to Saxony and living to an over ripe old age." And laughing boisterously he bid the friends adieu and went on his way.

As soon as he was gone Schwartz remarked, "Well, what say you? Shall we try and find this cave he talks about?"

"Why not," Falkenstein replied, "as well while away the time doing that as anything else."

Following the directions Bieber had given them, they then set off, and eventually arrived at the cavern.

"Come in, Herbert Schwartz and Karl Falkenstein," a voice, which might have belonged to either sex, for it was strangely indefinable, called out. "Come in, and learn what Fate has in store for you."

Crossing themselves devoutly, the friends obeyed and at once found themselves in impenetrable darkness. Then, while they were wondering what was going to happen next, a crystal was slipped into the right hand of each of them, and the voice told them to look at it. They obeyed, and presently each saw in the luminous surface of the crystal he held a distinct tableau. Schwartz saw himself engaged in a desperate struggle with a gigantic Saracen, who, at last, threw him on the ground and with a mighty sweep of his shining scimitar sliced his head off, while Falkenstein saw himself, cased in armour, trying to swim across a very turbid river. He had got within a few yards of the shore, when something made him suddenly throw up his arms and abruptly disappear from view.

"Do you wish to know more?" the voice asked.

"Yes," Schwartz responded. "Tell me something that is actually occurring at this moment."



YERK CAMPBELL

THE CURSE OF RUDESHEIM

"Very good," the voice rejoined. "Look in the crystal again."

Herbert Schwartz did as he was bid, and immediately the crystal became luminous, and he saw in it a dove, with a piece of rag tied to one of its legs.

"That dove has a message for you," the voice remarked, "if you go to the barren ground two hundred yards to the south east of this cave you will find it."

"Who are you that knows all these things?" Schwartz asked.

"I am called Kariffa here," the voice said, "but in Germany I was known as Steilhausen."

"Steilhausen!" Schwartz ejaculated, "I seem to know that name."

"Ask no more," the voice responded, "but, if you desire to save a friend, go at once to the spot I have mentioned."

"Come along," Falkenstein whispered, "I've had enough of this place, it's too horribly uncanny."

The two friends then stumbled out of the darkness into the open, and, on arriving at the barren piece of ground the strange being had specified, found a dove lying dead there, with a piece of linen round one of its legs. Schwartz examined it and immediately gave vent to a loud ejaculation.

"*Himmel!*" he cried, "Rudesheim is alive and in the hands of those cursed Infidels. We must rescue him at once."

The friends lost no time. Running back to the camp they spread the news among their comrades, and in a very short time a body of horsemen, armed to the teeth, were dashing off to the town where Rudesheim lay a prisoner.

On their arrival there, they were met by a body of

Saracens, that outnumbered them by something like ten to one, and a terrific fight ensued. A huge Saracen swooped down on Schwartz with such force that he was thrown from his horse on to the ground. He staggered to his feet, but ere he could draw his sword, the Saracen sprang on him, and, lifting him up as easily as if he had been made of paper, flung him heavily down. He essayed to rise, but the giant thrust him back, and, with a whirl of his glittering scimitar, cut off his head.

Rendered desperate at the death of their comrade, the Crusaders fought with the utmost fury, and so savagely did they wield their weapons, that the Infidels at length gave way and fled. With shouts of triumph the conquerors then rode into the town, and speedily discovering the dungeon where Rudesheim lay in chains, effected his rescue. The hardships he had undergone, however, had played such havoc with Rudesheim that he was not fit for further fighting, and the commander of the army he was with ordered him home for a rest. And now we must again shift the scene, this time to the lovely sunny terrace of the Castle of Rudesheim.

It is evening, and the beautiful Gisela and her lover, Sir Brandreth Odom, are walking up and down the terrace arm-in-arm. That morning, a messenger from Bonn had brought Gisela word that her father was still alive and would, that night, be at the castle, and she and Odom were now anxiously discussing the situation. What would the Knight of Rudesheim say when he learned of their betrothal, would he be pleased or otherwise? Gisela thought he would be pleased; he was fond of her, and surely what pleased her should please him, but Sir Brandreth was by no means sure. Though he had never met her father,

he knew him by reputation to be a very hard, stern man.

"Never mind, beloved, if he is angry at first. He is sure to be vexed at the thought of losing me," Gisela remarked, throwing her arms round Sir Brandreth's neck and kissing him tenderly on the lips. "You needn't have any fear. You know I am yours, yours always," and she was kissing him again, even more tenderly than before, when a dark shadow fell on the white soil at their feet, and the armour clad Knight of Rudesheim stood before them.

"What is this I see?" he exclaimed, an awful frown on his face. "Who is this fellow that takes advantage of my absence, to insult my daughter thus?"

"He is my betrothed, father," Gisela said in amazement. "Sir Brandreth Odom, of Gottesberg."

"Your betrothed!" the Knight of Rudesheim cried in a terrible voice. "Your betrothed! Dost know, daughter, that I vowed to Heaven to give you to the convent here, should God permit me to escape from the Infidels."

"But you would never keep such an oath," Sir Brandreth intervened indignantly.

"The Knight of Rudesheim not honour his vow!" was the stern reply. "You, Sir Brandreth Odom, by your own words prove yourself no fit mate for my daughter. Gisela shall depart at once to the Convent and devote the rest of her life to prayers."

"Oh, father," Gisela cried, bursting into tears, "You cannot mean what you say. I have vowed to marry Brandreth, and my vow is surely as binding as yours. Besides, Heaven would never expect you to fulfil such a monstrous vow as yours, made under the stress of circumstances that were unbearable."

But her father was obdurate, and when Gisela firmly refused to go to the Convent, he declared he would drag her there by force.

A drama that filled all the Rhineland with horror now took place. The Knight of Rudesheim, prepared to carry out his threat, caught hold of his daughter. Sir Brandreth tried to release her, and the Knight of Rudesheim stabbed him, inflicting a mortal wound. Gisela, then, on seeing her lover fall to the ground, with wild screams of anguish rushed to a pinnacle of rock overhanging the Rhine, and leaped in the river.¹

Seeing this happen, Karl Falkenstein, who had obtained leave to escort his friend Rudesheim home, and who happened to be on the river-bank at the time, plunged in the torrent in full armour, but ere he reached the struggling girl, he was swept away and drowned. (Thus, in his case, as well as in the case of Herbert Schwartz, the vision seen in the crystal was prophetic).

To return to the terrace. The Knight of Rudesheim, far from being grieved, on seeing his daughter leap into the river, cursed her.

"Wretched creature," he shouted, as she fell headlong into the blue waves, "thou art no child of mine, may thy spirit haunt the river to Doomsday."

"And may mine, too," a voice from close beside him exclaimed, "for where Gisela wanders, I would wander, too."

The Knight of Rudesheim turned in alarm, and, to his astonishment, beheld Sir Brandreth, whom he believed to be dead, lying on the ground, supporting

¹ Her body was subsequently found by fishermen, near the ruin called the Mouse Tower, in the middle of the Bingerloch.

himself on one elbow. Directly their eyes met Sir Brandreth cried out :

“Murderer ! For thy cruelty to Gisela, may the horrors of Hell come from the river and carry thee off, and, as a memento of thy crime, may the water where my beloved one perished be ever, even on the calmest day, turbid and sorrowful.” He said no more, but shaking one hand menacingly at the Knight of Rudesheim fell back and expired.

Exactly a week later the Knight of Rudesheim mysteriously disappeared, and two days afterwards a retainer at Rudesheim Castle staggered, white and ill-looking, into the presence of the local priest, with the following remarkable story :

“The night my master disappeared,” he said, “Rudolph Friesdorf and myself were out till late, or rather till early morning, for dawn had already broken when we returned. We had been in the village all the afternoon, and it was not until close on midnight that we left the house of Fritz Sinnenberg and set off to the castle. When we reached the path bordering on the north side of the terrace, Rudolph clutched my arm and pointed to a figure standing on the edge of the terrace, gazing into the river beneath. It was our master, the Knight of Rudesheim. He appeared buried in thought, and seemed to be oblivious of all around him. While we stood gazing at him, he moved from the terrace edge, and walking to a seat a few yards from where we were, sat down. He did not see us, because we were well under the shadow of the trees—had it not been for the shelter they afforded us, he must have done so, because it was a brilliant moonlight night. Still buried in a reverie, he sat as motionless as the statue on the village green, with his face hidden in his hands.

And now," the narrator gasped, his voice shaking with agitation, "comes the frightful part of it. May the Holy Virgin protect me," and he crossed himself feverishly. "As we were staring at our master, fascinated by we knew not what, something made us look simultaneously at the river, and while we were staring in that direction, a black shape rose to view over the edge or ledge of the terrace. At first I thought it must be the shadow of some passing cloud, but, on more of it coming into sight, I suddenly realized it was nothing of the sort. It was, God save me," here he fell to crossing himself again, "nothing of this world at all, but something unutterably foul and evil, and belonging entirely to the night."

"Or to the river," the priest murmured (the Knight of Rudesheim had told him what Sir Brandreth Odom had said when dying), "but go on, what was it like?"

"A huge crab or spider," the retainer said hoarsely. "A great thing with long hairy legs, frightful pincers, and light, slanting eyes, that lit up with a hellish glow, as they fixed themselves on my master. Mounting on to the terrace it crawled with a kind of sideways movement to the seat on which my master sat. I tried to go to him, to warn him, but I was spellbound, limb and tongue-tied, so was Rudolph. Neither of us could do anything, and something told me Rudolph was more frightened even than myself. Nearer and nearer the thing of horror crept, its baleful eyes never leaving the Knight of Rudesheim, who moved not, but continued to sit, with his face buried in the palms of his hands. At last it got right up to him, and then, suddenly, a big cloud obscured the moon, and all was black as the blackest ink. There was a wild shriek of terror, and when the moon again broke

forth in all its gleaming white splendour, neither my master nor the shape was any longer to be seen : they had utterly vanished. For some minutes I was too overcome with horror to do anything but gaze around me, in momentary expectation of seeing something else dreadful, but, eventually recovering my self-possession, I turned to speak to Rudolph. Then I received another shock. The poor fellow was mad ; what he had seen and heard had been too much for his reason, and I left him there gibbering."

This was the retainer's story, and it was corroborated by the condition in which Rudolph Friesdorf was found. But that is not all. A few nights later, a party of merrymakers, returning in a boat from Gaulsheim to Bingen, had a strange experience. Though the weather was absolutely fine and the air very calm and still, the water at the foot of der Mauseturm, or Mouse Tower, was swirling and raging, as if in the throes of a mighty storm, while they saw, standing on the rocks, clasped in one another's arms, two shadowy forms, those of a lady, with long flowing hair, and a knight, clad from head to foot in shining armour, and they identified them as Gisela of Rudesheim and Sir Brandreth Odom. And ever since then, up to the present time, the same figures, in fulfilment, presumably, of the Knight of Rudesheim's curse, have persistently haunted the locality, while the waters of the river there have never ceased to eddy and swirl.

The Mouse Tower rock has another ghost. It is generally believed to be that of Bishop Hatto, immortalized in Browning's poem of the *Rats*. Hatto is credited with having built the Mouse Tower as a

toll house. He extorted taxes from the surrounding people, imposed tolls, and invented new pecuniary burdens, only to gratify his haughty pride and love of display.

One year, there was a dreadful drought, followed by severe hail storms, that utterly destroyed the seeds that had been sown and caused a serious famine. The unhappy people, who were starving, consequently, came to the bishop and implored him to lower the price of corn, but all their petitions were in vain. Hatto only smiled a grim and dreadful smile, that told them they were dealing with a devil and not a man, and bade them cease bothering him. Desperation, however, caused them to persist, and then Hatto's attitude seemed suddenly to change. Instead of mocking them, he pretended to be sympathetic, and one day, when they came to him, promised them corn, telling them to go to a barn outside the town, where each would be given as much corn as he could carry away. The now happy peasants, their hearts full of gratitude, hastened away to the barn; but when they were all assembled in it, the doors were locked, and it was set on fire.

There are varied accounts of what followed. This is one of them.

In the midst of the conflagration a woman climbed up to one of the windows, and clinging to the red hot bars, screamed out a curse.

"May you suffer a thousand times worse than you have made us suffer, cruel Bishop," she cried, "may the rats from this barn and from the river eat the fat from your bones, while you are still living, and may your soul be chained for ever to the tower you built."

She said more, but her words were inaudible, owing to the roaring and hissing of the flames.



VERA CAMPBELL,

THE CURSE OF THE MOUSE TOWER

That night, soon after Hatto retired to bed, he was awakened by a terrible commotion in the palace, and, on going to see what it was, he found the whole place swarming with enormous, hideous looking rats, that at once rushed at him. Chasing him from room to room, they at length drove him into the palace grounds, and pursued him relentlessly to the Rhine. Thinking to get rid of them there, he rowed across to the island, on which he had erected the Mausethurm, and hid himself in the top room of it. In the dead of night, however, he was roused by a gnawing, grinding sound, and, to his horror, he realized it was the rats. In fulfilment of the burning woman's curse they had come to devour him. He shrieked and prayed, but it was of no avail; the rats, reinforced by a number of brown horrors from the river, nibbled their way in, and rushing on him in thousands, bore him to the ground, and picked his bones clean.

This is what tradition says, and it also says that so long as there is a stone of the Mouse Tower left, the spot will be haunted by the earthbound spirit of the doomed prelate.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PEASANT BOY'S CURSE ¹

ONE midsummer night, a young shepherd called Guzman, was wending his way along a bridle-path through a dense and dark forest a few miles from the city of Burgos, which was then, at a time when all Christian Spain lived in constant terror of Almanzor, the Moorish King of Cordova, the seat of the Castilian Government. The farm upon which Guzman was employed lay behind him, and having wandered far in search of some missing sheep, he was now in a part of the country with which he was little familiar. But he was a stout-hearted youth, and being determined to save his charges from their ruthless enemies the wolves, he plunged further and further into the great forest, without a care for the consequences.

Every now and again the path, gleaming white in the moonlight, showed traces of the truants, and thus led on he progressed at a fair rate, though not infrequently he would pull up sharp, startled by the ominous cry of some animal taken unawares, or the wailing of some night bird, a wailing so unearthly that he must needs cross himself and call upon Our Lady to protect him from all evil spirits.

In this intermittent fashion he pushed his way ahead till at last he came to a great open space,

¹ History and legend are intertwined in this story, which is not invariably authentic.

where, to his great joy, he found his flock, all unharmed and contentedly nibbling the long luxuriant grass that grew there. Delighted beyond measure that not one of his sheep was missing, he was about to drive them home, when he noticed for the first time a strange spectacle. On one side of the open space confronting him was a precipice, and on the edge of it stood a tall man in armour, with his arms folded, as if lost in meditation. The moonbeams falling directly on his face threw his features into strong relief, and Guzman at once recognized him. He was Count Garcia, King of Castile.¹ A moment later and a gigantic Moor, clad in the glittering chain-armour and spiked cap so much in vogue just then among the Moorish nobility, stole up behind the unsuspecting Count, seized him round the waist, and lifting him up pitched him head first over the precipice. The Moor then, after peering into the depths below, as if to make sure his unfortunate victim was dead, turned round and stole furtively away. The whole drama was enacted in less time than it takes to tell, and its awful suddenness and sheer horror left Guzman too dazed to think, or even to move. When at last his faculties reasserted themselves he ran at once to the foot of the precipice, but only to discover that the Count was dead, the fall had broken his neck. Determined to do his utmost to bring the perpetrator of the foul deed to justice, for he felt he should know him again anywhere, so distinctly had he seen his features in the moonlight, Guzman set off homewards, driving his recovered flock before him.

Spain at that time was in a very unsettled state. Not only were conflicts between the Spaniards and

¹ Castile at that period enjoyed the somewhat unique distinction of being ruled by a line of Sovereign Counts.

Moors of almost daily occurrence, but the whole country was overrun by bands of savage brigands, who lived in the woods and mountains and robbed and murdered indiscriminately. However, as none so far had been seen in the vicinity of Burgos, in Guzman's mind there lurked only one fear, the fear of wolves and bears, which at that period were to be found in nearly every forest in Spain; and he was hurrying forward, his thoughts centred on the horrible crime he had just witnessed, when the whizz of an arrow in close proximity to his head brought him to a sudden standstill. The next moment strong arms seized him from behind, and he found himself in the clutches of a dozen or more ferocious looking ruffians, armed with all sorts of weapons, who bade him choose immediately between joining their ranks or hanging by the neck till he was dead from a neighbouring tree.

Realizing the hopelessness of his position, and not wishing to die in so ignominious and painful a manner, Guzman chose the former alternative, albeit to his credit with some reluctance, whereupon he was at once hustled forward and conducted, his sheep with him, to a rude encampment on the banks of a stream, which formed the temporary headquarters of the band.

For several weeks the brigands kept Guzman a close prisoner, and they often treated with great cruelty, especially when, after venturing forth in search of booty they returned home empty-handed. They then vented their spleen on him, accusing him of bringing them ill-luck, and threatening to put him to some terrible death should bad fortune attend them again.

Oddly enough, the worse of his persecutors on these

occasions was Sancha, the young wife of the leader of the band, who, for some strange reason, conceived a violent antipathy to Guzman and was ever scheming to get him into trouble. She made him do all the menial work of the encampment, and on one occasion, because he failed to perform some task to her satisfaction, she beat him to a state of insensibility with an iron chain, while on another occasion, for some equally trivial fault, she aimed a blow at him with her poniard, which, had it reached home, would instantly have ended his career. Indeed, it was indirectly through her that eventually he met his fate.

After he had been a captive some months, the robbers received information from one of their spies in Burgos, that a certain very rich merchant was contemplating leaving that city, shortly, on a journey to Madrid, and, anxious to find out the exact date of the merchant's departure, the leader of the brigands contemplated going to Burgos in disguise and making enquiries. His wife, however, objected, declaring that it was far too risky a job for him to undertake, and she suggested that Guzman should be made to do the job instead, her object being, of course, to get rid of him.

The leader of the band demurred, evidently wishing to go on this enterprise himself, but as Sancha showed signs of giving way to one of those violent outbursts of passion in which she not infrequently indulged, when she was thwarted, he reluctantly consented to her proposal, and entrusted Guzman with the mission.

Told what to do and threatened with instant death should he fail in the execution of his task, Guzman left the encampment one evening *en route* for Burgos. One might, perhaps, think that Guzman, now that he

had the opportunity, would have tried to escape, but he was a simple lad, and having given his word to the robber chief, it did not occur to him to break it. Besides, where could he have gone, and what could he have done? Since his former employer would never forgive him for the loss of the sheep, he could not return to the farm, and as he had no home of his own, deserting the robbers would, in all probability, have meant starvation. Thus, with his mind bent on the mission he had undertaken, he rode steadily on, gauging the time, as shepherds in olden days were accustomed to do, by the position in the sky of the moon and stars.

After leaving the scene of his late misfortunes some considerable distance behind him, Guzman again entered the dark and densely wooded forest and took the bridle-path along which his route to Burgos lay. The evening dew fell chilly around him and the gloomy scenery fostered in him sad and strange fancies, that despite his efforts, he could not shake off; and feeling thus depressed, he presently found himself descending a steep incline into a dismal looking valley, whose dark tree-tops, far below him, waved, to and fro, in ghostly fashion in the cool night breeze.

Holding tightly to the pommel of his saddle, for he had never ridden a mule before, he continued the descent very cautiously, fearful every moment lest the animal should fall and pitch him head foremost down the decline.

When at last he reached the bottom of it, he breathed more freely, and the moon shining forth from behind a heavy canopy of clouds enabled him to obtain a full view of his surroundings. They had not improved. On either side of the road in front of

him he could discern the trunks of trees, intermingled with large and misshapen masses of stone, gleaming white in the moonbeams ; and these, combined with the hoarse rushing sound of a waterfall near-by, made the spot one that for desolation and eeriness it would be very hard to beat. Anxious, therefore, to quit so forlorn a scene, he urged on his mule to a greater speed, but he had hardly done so, before it stumbled and crashed heavily with him to the ground. Luckily, however, he was more shaken than hurt, and he was about to rise, when two men, with uplifted knives, advanced stealthily towards him. They were brigands, whom Sancha had bribed to waylay and murder him, and they would, no doubt, have succeeded in their nefarious purpose, since their intended victim was but armed with a cudgel, had not a clattering of hoofs at that moment announced the approach of a large party of horsemen. The would-be assassins then, to avoid a skirmish in which they were certain to be beaten, took to their heels, and quickly disappeared in the darkness.

The newcomers, a party of Castilian soldiers, taking Guzman for a mere country bumpkin, which indeed he was, exchanged a few words of good-natured badinage with him and allowed him to proceed unmolested. Thus, in due course, he reached Burgos, where he spent the night, and having fulfilled his mission, he was about to return on the following day to the brigands' encampment, when a lady stopped him on the outskirts of the town, and asked him to take a note for her to the Palace. Not daring to refuse, for the lady's dress and demeanour bespoke her one of the nobility, Guzman took the note from her and at once set off in the direction of the Palace, which, being in the fashionable quarter, was far

enough away from that in which he had been staying, in order to transact his business for the brigands. Now, it so happened that, on this particular day, all the principal streets in Burgos were thronged with visitors, the occasion being a fête held in honour of the coming of age of Count Sancho Garcia, the young sovereign of Castile. The mansions of the nobles and principal knights were hung with costly draperies, festooned with flowers ; banners and pennons waved from every house-top, the olive branch and laurel being gracefully entwined in the arms of Castile and Cordova, while the crescent, much to the indignation and surprise of many of the Christians in the city, was almost as conspicuous as the Cross ; the people were all in their gayest attire ; and merry peals of bells mingled their cadence with the stirring blast of trumpets and the equally thrilling tattoo of drums.

Utterly astounded at such a scene, a scene, which in his wildest flights of fancy, he could never have imagined, Guzman steered his course through the gay throngs, exciting considerable mirth by his very rustic appearance, awkward gait, and only too obvious bewilderment.

When, at last, he stood in front of the Palace gates, he found, to his dismay, that to gain admittance was no easy matter. The sentry on duty looked him up and down, and, apparently, had it not been for the fact that the letter he carried bore a well-known seal, it would have stood no chance at all of ever reaching its destination. As it was, Guzman was admitted, only on sufferance, and glad enough he was when, after a long and weary walk through the Palace grounds, he was at length able to deliver the letter and commence retracing his steps. However, as he had taken little notice of the way he had come, and

the paths in the Palace grounds, of which there were many branching off in every direction, all looked alike to him, he not unnaturally went astray, and, instead of finding an exit he presently found himself in a little grove, composed of very beautiful Oriental trees and shrubs. Charmed with such a spectacle, for he loved, above everything, all that was beautiful in nature, he paused, and throwing back his head drew in deep breaths of the deliciously scented air. While thus engaged, he heard the sound of voices proceeding, so he fancied, from the depths of the grove, and filled with a great desire to see the speakers he tip-toed noiselessly in the direction of the voices and cautiously peeped through the foliage. A fascinating scene confronted him. On a garden seat, under a tree, in the centre of a velvety lawn, sat, with their backs turned towards him, a lady and gentleman, the lady with an arm placed round the gentleman's neck, in such a manner that her hand rested on his shoulder. A sun ray—it was a beautiful summer afternoon—finding its way through the leafy shelter overhead and falling directly on the hand, drew Guzman's attention to it. It was slender and white, and the fingers, long and tapering, were crowned with rosy nails of an exquisite shape. A more perfect hand one could not have found upon anyone. Guzman gazed at it in awestruck astonishment. Accustomed only to the hands of peasant women, or women who did a lot of rough manual work, its whiteness and beauty dumbfounded him. Never had he conceived a hand could be so lovely. And the owner of it, he argued, must be some very great lady, because, not only was the hand beautiful but jewelled rings adorned the fingers, while upon the wrist and arm gleamed several gold bracelets.

Wondering what the lady was like, and if her face were as beautiful as her hand and arm, Guzman again yielded to curiosity, and feeling his way noiselessly to the opposite side of the enclosure, he eventually succeeded in obtaining a full view of the couple.

To his disappointment the lady was not so young as he had imagined. Though strikingly handsome, with dark glossy hair, large grey eyes, very regular features and lovely teeth, she was not a girl, but appeared to be in the mid-thirties. From her dress, which was of a very rich and costly material, and general appearance, Guzman concluded she was some lady at the Court, one of the nobility he had heard so much about, and he was so interested that it was long ere he could take his eyes off her. When, however, he did look at her companion, he received a tremendous shock. Almost a giant in stature, and extremely handsome, he was recognized by Guzman at once: he was the cruel and cowardly assassin of Count Garcia, the late King of Castile.

That a Spanish lady should embrace a Moor, one of Spain's most bitter and relentless enemies, was bad enough, but for that Moor to be a base assassin, why, it was monstrous, and Guzman was so overcome with horror and indignation that he had to lean against a tree-trunk for support.

What should he do? Denounce the murderer? But would he, just a poor peasant, be believed? Besides, he knew no one, at least no one who would stand by him and say that they believed he was telling the truth.

In his agitation he forgot to be cautious, and the lovers, who happened at that moment to be sitting in silence, hearing the crackling of a twig he had

trodden on, were startled. The lady uttered a cry, while the Moor, rising hastily, drew his scimitar, The sight of the glittering blade, and in so powerful a hand, proved, of course, too much for the unarmed country youth—he was utterly demoralized, and fled. Running blindly on, his one idea being to escape the terrible Moor, he all but collided with a couple of the Palace guards, who were strolling leisurely along, trailing their weapons on the ground.

“Whither so fast, young man,” they exclaimed, seizing Guzman by the arms and holding him fast. “Are you running from the Devil?”

“Yes,” Guzman gasped, very out of breath, “the devil who murdered our late Sovereign.”

“Murdered our late Sovereign,” the soldiers laughed, “why, where have you been drinking?”

“I’m not drunk,” Guzman exclaimed excitedly. “I’m quite sober and serious,” and he described to them the tragedy he had witnessed in the forest.

“Will you swear by Our Lady that all this is true?” one of the guards said, directly Guzman ceased speaking.

“Yes, sir,” Guzman replied, “I swear by all I hold most sacred that every word I have spoken is the truth.”

“I believe you,” the other guard ejaculated, then to his companion, “the lad is too simple to lie, Juan. Are you sure it was the same Moor?” he went on, turning again to Guzman.

“Positive,” Guzman exclaimed, “I’d know the villain anywhere.”

“And the lady with him, describe her,” Juan said.

Guzman did so, in the slow, ponderous manner that was characteristic of the peasant class, omitting no

detail he had observed and dwelling at length on the wondrous beauty of her hands and arms.

"It was the Queen, Donna Ava herself," Juan ejaculated, with a low whistle. "I suspected as much, Ferdinand."

Ferdinand nodded, but said nothing.

"You are fooling me," Guzman exclaimed, looking in bewilderment from one to the other. "The lady I saw with the Moor couldn't be the Queen, our late Sovereign's consort."

"Oh, but it could," Juan laughed. "If you value your life, young man, you will say nothing more about what you have seen. It is the common secret of the town that our late Sovereign's consort is head over ears in love with Almanzor."

"With Almanzor!" Guzman stammered, "the man I saw push our King over the cliff, Almanzor, the renowned King of Cordova and the scourge of Spain."

"None other," Juan said calmly, "and though none hate him more than we do, we have to stay our hands till we receive orders to do otherwise."

"I can hardly believe it," Guzman cried out excitedly. "Do you think the Queen has any idea that he murdered her husband?"

Juan shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe, maybe not," he replied. "All Burgos knows she never cared that much for our late King," and he snapped his fingers. "Now be off, lad," he went on, "and remember my advice—say nothing."

Guzman needed no second bidding to depart; following the direction given him by the guards, he speedily reached the Palace gates, and was soon on his way back to the brigands' encampment mounted on his mule.

That night witnessed the wildest revelry in Burgos. Half the male population drank twice as much as was good for them, and included in this category were Juan and Ferdinand. In a state of absolute irresponsibility, they sat in the cosy parlour of the Crown and Olive and blabbed out everything the simple Guzman had told them.

Now, the men of Burgos at that period were terrible gossips (I am told they still are), and in a very short time all the city was talking of the Queen's clandestine meetings with Almanzor, and how the Moor had been seen to push her unfortunate husband over a precipice. Hence, in due course of time, the story reached the Royal Palace. One of the scullions, who had heard it in the town, whispered it to an under cook, the under cook told it to the head cook, the head cook detailed it, with sundry additions, to a footman, the footman to a page, the page to a maid and so it crept upwards, till eventually it came to the Queen herself.

She simulated scorn, maintaining that such a story was utterly absurd and beneath contempt, but she determined, nevertheless, to discover its originator and have him or her punished in a manner that would serve as a very effectual warning to all who were at all inclined to tittle-tattle.

With this object in view she employed numerous spies, and at last learnt from one of them that the author of the story was Guzman, a poor peasant lad, who had last been seen on a mule making for the forests that lay a few miles due west of the city.

On receipt of this information the Queen offered a reward for the capture of Guzman, and descriptions of him were posted up all over Burgos.

Now, it so happened that among the many people

who read these notices was none other than Sancha herself, who was visiting Burgos, one day, in the guise of a market woman. Anxious to get the reward, and overjoyed at the prospect of a cruel end for Guzman, she immediately set off for the brigands' encampment, had Guzman bound hand and foot, and returning with him to Burgos, delivered him up to the Queen.

The latter at once took the precaution of having Guzman's tongue removed. This was done in her presence with all the savage barbarity peculiar to the times. The unfortunate youth was then thrown in the deepest and darkest dungeon of the Castle, with the cheering assurance that he was to be publicly flogged to death in a few days' time.

Marvellous to relate, however, he seems to have borne the Queen no ill-will, but to have begged incessantly for just one look, before he died, at the beautiful hands that had fascinated him so much. This request was mockingly refused, and on the day appointed, he was executed, perishing in fearful agony, whilst a vast throng of people, who, if they had any sympathy at all for him were far too intimidated to show it, looked on.

It is affirmed that, after his death, the following was found scribbled on the walls of his cell :

“ To Donna Ava, the Queen Regent of Castile. My curse be upon you, may those beautiful hands of yours prove as fatal to you as they have done to me. GUZMAN.”

Some days after his execution a project as diabolical as it was daring entered the mind of Almanzor. For a long time he had coveted the kingdom of Castile,

which he wanted, above everything else, to see united to his own territory of Cordova. Once that was accomplished, he would be by far the richest and most powerful ruler in Spain, and the conquest of the complete country would be, so it seemed to him, merely a matter of time.

Towards the attainment of this object a union with the Queen appeared to be the simplest way, but though he knew the Queen was madly in love with him and would marry him whenever he wished, there was yet a serious obstacle in his path, namely, the Queen's son, Don Sancho Garcia, the rightful heir to the sovereignty of Castile, which his mother, who was devoted to him, only held temporarily as Regent. Now, Don Sancho Garcia was immensely popular with the people, and it was quite hopeless for Almanzor to think of usurping the throne so long as he, Sancho Garcia, lived. Indeed, Almanzor realized that the only chance of carrying out his ambition, namely, to bring about the union of Castile with Cordova, lay in Sancho Garcia's death, and the question was, how could he best accomplish that? To order some hireling to stab or strangle him, or to kill him himself would, perhaps, be easy, but he might be suspected, especially after the rumours Guzman had originated, and which, despite that youth's execution, were still afloat. No, it would be far safer to persuade Donna Ava, Garcia's own mother, to do the deed.

She had great power over the people, who, ever since she had inflicted and herself supervized such condign punishment on the hapless Guzman, were all in mortal terror of her, so that even if it were known that she had murdered her son, none would dare denounce her. However, to undermine her affection for the young King so completely that she

would consent to the crime would be no easy task ; and, in any case, it would take time ; but so ardent and obvious was her passion for himself that he felt absolutely sure of ultimate success.

He began, then, by throwing out to her occasional hints of what he wished, picturing in the most seductive colours the tremendous advantage accruing to them both of a union between Castile and Cordova, a union that might be brought about by her marriage with him ; and when she threw herself into his arms and declared she was ready to marry him, whenever he liked, as he had anticipated she would do, he told her that to one of his undoubted valour and achievements, the thought of playing a minor rôle to her son, a mere youth, totally unversed and unproved in the art of war, was intolerable. With so great a stumbling-block in the way, he added, much as he loved her, he could never make up his mind to marry her.

After he had spoken to her thus he remained for a time silent and motionless, his arms crossed, his gaze fixed on her, and when she was not looking at him, he smiled sardonically. Never before, perhaps, had such a conflict raged in any heart as in Donna Ava's. She knew instinctively that Almanzor was now contemplating murder, just as she had known all along, though he had never told her, that he had murdered her husband ; yet his utter badness only served to increase her passion for him. She could not give him up, could not lose him.

Almanzor had no need to be an expert psychologist to see what was passing in her mind. He divined it instantly. It was just what he had expected, and he took his cue accordingly.

"Donna Ava," he exclaimed, "you think more of

your son's position than my love. You would rather that your son were your King than I were your husband; for you cannot fail to see that I must be first and foremost with you and with your subjects, even as I have ever been first and foremost with my own people. Adieu," and turning on his heels Almanzor proceeded to leave the room.

The Queen called him back. "Almanzor," she exclaimed bitterly, "after all that has taken place between us, you cannot leave me thus. If ever a woman loved a man devotedly and blindly I have loved you—you, the enemy of Spain—you, who murdered my husband. For you I have sacrificed everything—country, honour, virtue. And yet you are not content. You want me now to add to all my sins the most frightful crime imaginable, and because I hesitate, you threaten to leave me."

"Then you have read my thoughts," Almanzor said in a low voice, leaving the door and walking slowly up to her.

"I can see it in your eyes," the Queen faltered.

"Well, it is either that," Almanzor said, "or I return at once to Cordova and you will never see me again. I give you till midnight to decide."

Kissing her coldly on the forehead he then withdrew, to smile a smile of the deepest satisfaction and triumph as soon as the door closed on him.

"She'll do it," he said to himself, "she'd sacrifice the world and everyone in it for me." And he hastily left the Palace.

Alone in her boudoir the Queen threw herself on her couch and, burying her face in her hands, thought. God in heaven, what was she to do? She loved her son, but she loved Almanzor more. The idea of losing him, of never seeing or hearing him again, was

more than she could bear. She had sinned so much already, that another sin, deadly though it might be, could scarcely make much difference. Whether she killed her son or not, she would go to Hell, why should she not, therefore, drink her fill of pleasure while she was still able.

She was reasoning in this fashion when her favourite cat, a fine Persian, leaped on to the divan, and accidentally scratched her arm. The pain maddened Ava, and picking up the stiletto that lay by her side she plunged it into the poor animal's side. Quite by chance the blade passed through its heart and it rolled over, dead.

The Queen examined the body with interest. "After all," she said, "it's quite easy to kill. Just one blow and life goes. Sancho need never know who aimed the blow."

An hour later Almanzor received a note. It was from the Queen.

"I'll do what you wish," she wrote, "only come back."

The night fixed for the murder was that on which a great banquet was to be given to celebrate the occasion of the young King taking over the reins of government from his mother. All the leading nobility, not only in Castile but in the adjacent states, were invited to it, together with a number of distinguished Moors—for the time being there was a truce between the Spaniards and Moors—including, of course, Almanzor. The speech of the evening was to be made by Don Sancho, and the Queen decided to poison the wine specially reserved for the toast he would give.

Now, it so happened that one of the Royal servants, who none of the other servants liked very much, and

had nicknamed "Ugly Pedro," had been recently punished several times for various slight offences, such as unpunctuality and forgetfulness, and the Queen determined so to arrange her plans that all suspicion of the crime would fall upon him. With this end in view she ordered him to wait solely on the King at the banquet and take charge of the wine reserved exclusively for the young Monarch's use. Before the wine was entrusted to him, however, she covertly poisoned it and hid what poison remained in "Ugly Pedro's" bedroom.

With this damning evidence against him, it would be useless for him to protest his innocence, and a little racking, or something even worse, would be quite sufficient to make him plead guilty. He would then be either strangled or burned, no matter which.

The eventful day of the banquet at last arrived, and all her plans successfully laid, the Queen breathed freely. Arrayed in her most costly and elaborate apparel, and displaying upon neck and arms all her most valuable jewels, she made her appearance in the great reception-room of the Palace, with even more than her usual dignity.

As she stood by the young King's side, receiving the guests, no one would have suspected what was passing in her mind; smiling and animated, she appeared to take an unbounded and almost childish pleasure in the proceedings. Yet, in reality, she was in a state of the most horrible suspense. She had repeatedly braced herself with wine, but now that all the preliminaries concerning her pledge to Almanzor had been accomplished without a hitch, and its successful termination seemed a certainty, her nerves were on the verge of giving way, and it was only by exerting

an almost superhuman effort that she could appear calm.

"Do I look all right?" she kept saying to Don Sancho. "I feel terribly nervous. Maria"—Maria was her favourite maid—"has not arranged my hair as well as usual, and I could not find the ruby ring I like so much and always wear on these occasions—it is the one your poor father gave me the year he died."

"You look divine," Don Sancho whispered, gazing admiringly first at his mother's hands, which had sent all the Castilian poets and artists into raptures, and then at her face. "No one could be more beautiful. You know, you are not only my mother, you are my sweetheart," and he gave the hand nearest him a gentle squeeze.

The Queen again was silent, her brain was on fire, and she was filled with a terrible and nauseating loathing of herself. In order to avoid her son's earnest, tender gaze, she glanced at her dress, smoothed it, and then looked at herself ostensibly to see that all was right, in a large mirror on the wall by her side. But, in addition to herself, she saw a crowd of her guests reflected in the mirror, and at the sight of Almanzor among them she gave a guilty start.

Almanzor, clad in red velvet robes, and wearing a magnificent gold chain round his neck, was moving slowly across the room. Tall and slender, with beautifully proportioned limbs, he presented a striking appearance, and more than one Spanish lady glanced approvingly at him.

Donna Ava, no longer gazing through the mirror, looked at him admiringly, too; and she was wondering why he had turned his back and was not looking at

her, when she saw him surreptitiously slip something into Donna Violante Cajerval's hand as he passed her by.

Now, of all the ladies at the Court, Donna Violante was generally deemed the prettiest. Small and slight, with neat little features, blue eyes, and curly golden hair, she was the exact opposite in appearance to the Queen, and just the type that was likely to prove extraordinarily attractive to Almanzor, who, it must be remembered, was a Moor. Violante, moreover, was a notorious flirt, and, despite her youth—she was still in the early twenties—she had figured in a number of scandals. Married as well as unmarried were among her victims, and only quite recently Count Benavides, a married man with grown up children, had fallen in a duel, fought on her behalf.

Nothing, therefore, could have caused a greater shock to Donna Ava than the spectacle of this brazen, shameless hussy—as she at once mentally dubbed her—carrying on an intrigue with Almanzor. How dare she? How dare, how could he? And after all she, Donna Ava, had done, and was still doing, for him. Oh! And in the tumult of her emotion, she drove the pointed tips of her fingers so deep into her flesh that the blood actually came. Indeed, she was so infuriated that she found it almost impossible to go on with her duties as a hostess, and that she at last forced herself to do so, unflinchingly and apparently quite calmly, proves she possessed almost superhuman courage and self-control.

As for Almanzor, he was both surprised and alarmed at her obvious coldness. He constantly tried to encounter her gaze, but could not, and this curious behaviour on her part made him wonder if she had fulfilled her promise.

In due course the banquet began, and after what seemed to be an eternity to both Almanzor and the Queen, the young King at length rose from his seat, amid a sudden and general silence. He had taken the golden goblet in his hand, and was actually beginning to propose the toast of his guests, when the Queen, glancing furtively at Almanzor and Donna Violante, who were seated next each other, saw them exchange glances, which left no doubt whatever as to the nature of their friendship.

Mad with jealousy, all her love for the Moor gone, leaving in its place the most bitter hate, for she now realized that she had been Almanzor's dupe, and that he did not care for her at all, she snatched the goblet from her son's hand, and before he could recover from his astonishment, she had drained its contents.

Then, pointing at Almanzor, she cried out in a loud voice :

"Seize the villain ! He murdered my husband, and he would have had me try and poison my son !"

She tried to say more but could not, and sinking back into her seat she expired in the greatest agony.

Thus, dying by her own hand, the hand which Guzman the poor peasant lad had so greatly admired, the prophecy attributed to him was fulfilled.

Almanzor was never brought to book. In the confusion that followed the Queen's denunciation of him, he escaped, only, however, to perish, soon afterwards, in battle with the Spaniards.

